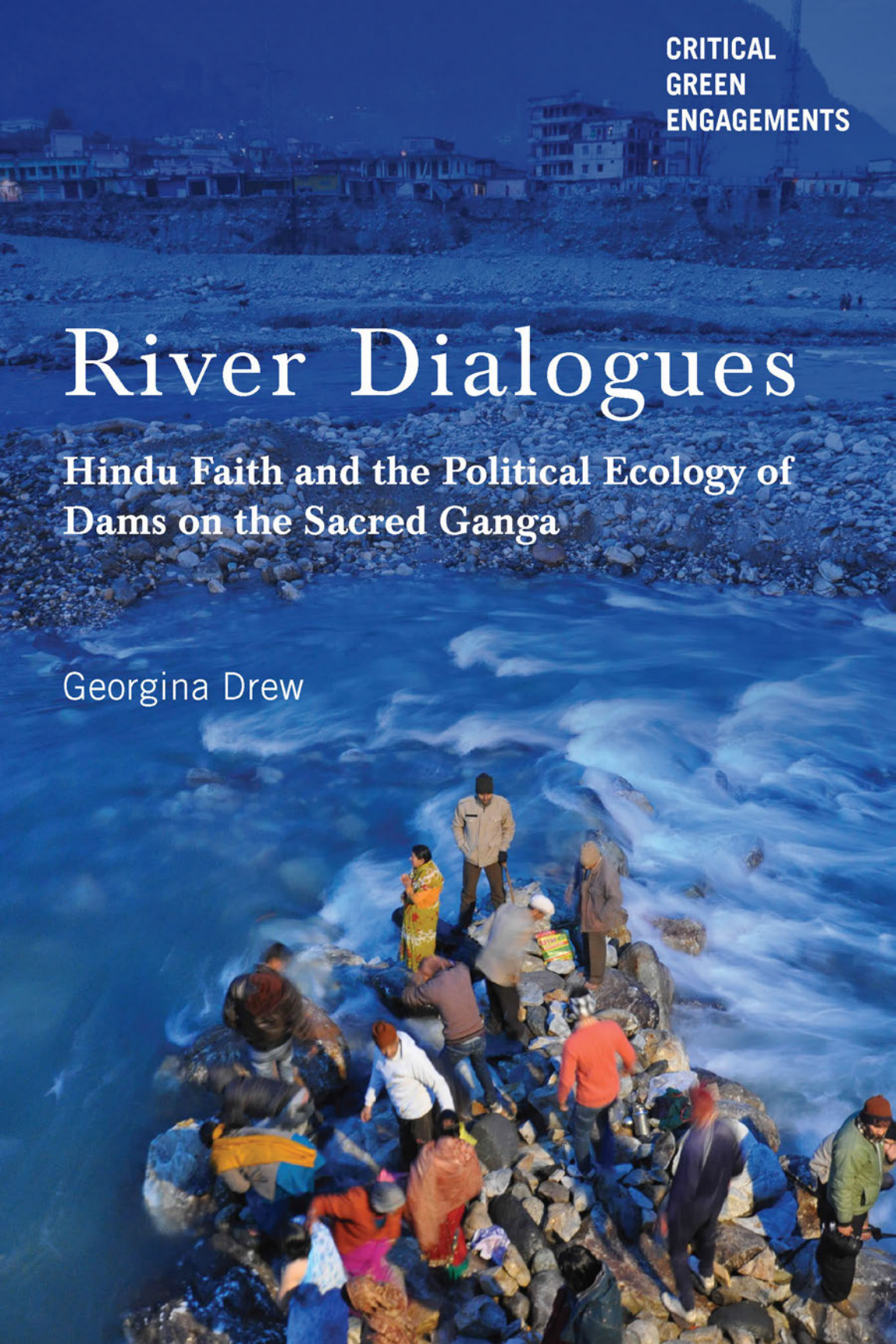


CRITICAL  
GREEN  
ENGAGEMENTS

# River Dialogues

Hindu Faith and the Political Ecology of  
Dams on the Sacred Ganga

Georgina Drew



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# RIVER DIALOGUES

# CRITICAL GREEN ENGAGEMENTS

## Investigating the Green Economy and Its Alternatives

*Jim Igoe, Molly Doane, Dan Brockington, Tracey Heatherington,  
Bram Büscher, and Melissa Checker*

SERIES EDITORS

GEORGINA DREW

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# RIVER DIALOGUES

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*Hindu Faith and the Political Ecology  
of Dams on the Sacred Ganga*



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*“Let the Ganga flow free!  
Let the Ganga remain pure!”*

*“Ganga ko aviral behne do!  
Ganga ko nirmal rehne do!”*

DAM OPPOSITION CHANT



# GANGA'S FLOW THROUGH INDIA



FIGURE 1. Map of Ganga's Flow Through India; Image Used with Permission by Lakpa Tamang



FIGURE 2. Image of the Ganga Flowing Through Uttarkashi

# PRELUDE

## Development Encounters in Religious Landscapes

**T**HIS BOOK EXPLORES CONFLICT over development and conservation along a Himalayan stretch of the River Ganga (also known as the Ganges) in India's Uttarakhand State. It focuses on competing discourses about change, including the transformations brought on by hydroelectric development, along a water body that is revered by Hindus as a living goddess whose unfettered flow is capable of physically and spiritually purifying devotees. I emphasize the competing values asserted by people from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds over how the Ganga's freely flowing waters should be used and protected. These different perceptions are part of the cultural politics that fueled the controversy over dam building on the Ganga, and they are important to the contestations that arose when the region was eventually declared an Ecologically Sensitive Zone. The tensions that emerged over the policy change are best understood, I argue, by combining the lens of cultural politics with political ecology. I explain these links in the introduction and throughout the book. Here, I pause to situate the growth of my interest in these issues and explain the ways in which I came to study them.

My engagement in the topics that inspire this book emerged in a roundabout way. The first time I saw an image of the River Ganga I was an undergraduate student at a small liberal arts college in California in the late 1990s. I recall being seated in a Cultural Anthropology course that was about to start when I turned to a page in my textbook and saw a photograph that visually captured a moment



of Hindu reverence for the river and its associated goddess. The photo, which showed people with hands folded in moments of prayer as they faced toward the Ganga, was most likely taken from the river's banks in Varanasi, India. This is arguably one of the most iconic locations for the Ganga's worship due to the continuity of rituals for the living and the dead that span over two millennia in the oldest of India's thriving cities. I remember feeling curiosity when confronted with a scene so different from anything I had known growing up on the west coast of the United States. It would perhaps make for a good story if I said that I felt something more, that a part of my being stirred at the sight of those prayerful poses. That would not be the truth; instead, I absorbed the image and continued my study of different religious practices from around the world before the instructor walked in and class began.

I recalled this memory when I encountered the river several years later in 2004. I first saw and touched its waters at a point where the river emerges from the Himalaya in a city known as Rishikesh. Experiencing the river in person was completely different from seeing a photo. The Ganga was wide and powerful as it flowed through a riverbed bordered on all sides by ashrams (centers of religious or spiritual retreat). Devotees of Indian and foreign origin emerged throughout the day to touch the waters and to swim playfully in parts of the river where the current was not too swift. At twilight, people gathered to sing devotional songs alongside the Ganga's banks in evening fire ceremonies referred to as *aarti*. The embodied experience of being alongside the river and of seeing the emotional fervor with which it is celebrated was beyond anything I imagined. In a world where water resources are so easily taken for granted, the reverence I witnessed for the Ganga stood out as a welcome exception.

As 2004 wore on, I found myself compelled to return to the river. I traveled to Varanasi and saw scenes reminiscent of that textbook photo. I also returned several times to Rishikesh. It was enthralling to watch people approach the Ganga time and again with their prayers and their faith in the river's powers of inner and outer purification (to be explained more in subsequent chapters). At the same time, I was also increasingly alarmed by reports in the news that the Ganga's headwaters were being subject to a series of hydroelectric development projects. These projects were located near to the upstream glaciers that feed one of the Ganga's first tributaries, labeled on maps as the Bhagirathi (and sometimes the Bhagirathi Ganga). The newspapers and online media outlets noted that these glaciers were receding and that the dams were likely shortsighted efforts that would be rendered obsolete if the glaciers disappeared. In my naïveté,

I struggled to understand why the government would approve projects on the last freely flowing section of a sacred Hindu river, especially when the ecological context seemed so fragile.

Toward the end of 2004, I traveled to the Ganga's first tributary to see for myself the impact of the ongoing hydroelectric development projects. On my way up the mountains above Rishikesh, in the region of Garhwal, I passed a colossal dam in its final stages of completion. The rock-and-earth fill construction stood out as a somber gray pyramid stuck in the middle of a valley between two mountainsides, near a town called Tehri. The dam would eventually submerge over a hundred villages and displace thousands of people.

The Tehri dam was not, however, my point of focus. Although it would become important to my understanding of the politics of hydroelectricity along the Ganga, I was initially more interested in understanding the impact of three new projects that were planned for construction much farther upstream. I continued onward, eventually traveling to a prominent point of worship to the goddess Ganga at a high-altitude temple town known as Gangotri. This location is above where the three newest dams were targeted for implementation; however, since those projects were not yet in visible stages of construction, the trip to Gangotri allowed me to see one of the more auspicious pilgrimage destinations for Ganga devotees. Once there, I traveled 22 kilometers (15 miles) by foot to the receding terminus point for the Gangotri glacier. By the time I reached the terminus point—an outcropping of ice called Gaumukh—my head spun from the increase in altitude and exposure to the sun on the long hike over rocky terrain.<sup>1</sup> Bits of greenish-blue ice shone from under the gray, soot-looking debris covering the glacier. This lent an air of fragility to an otherwise massive and commanding body of ice that stretches far up into the mountains. Along the way, in Gangotri and on the trails, I asked those I met about the three impending dams planned for construction downstream. Only one person offered a strong opinion: a Hindi swami, who dedicated a large portion of his life to photographing changing Himalayan ecologies, lamented that the dams would not make a difference; Ganga was already “finished” (*khatam*). His view—one that I would hear repeatedly over the years—was that mismanagement and poor development choices led the river to ruin.

Moving back down the mountain, I stopped for several days at a sizable settlement alongside the Ganga that is roughly 100 kilometers (62 miles) south of Gangotri. It was there, in the more populated town of Uttarkashi, that I began to meet people concerned about the pending hydroelectric dams. They were

worried about the potential impact of these projects on cultural and religious practices because of the disruption of the Ganga's passage through the region. "How will we continue our worship to the Ganga," they asked, "if we can no longer access her flowing waters?" Some of these same interlocutors commented that the tourist and pilgrimage economy, upon which much commerce in the region relies, might also be diminished. Additional statements were offered that pointed toward physical, as well as subjective, implications of damming the last unfettered part of the river. Since the dams were designed as diversion projects that would take water out of the riverbed and direct it through tunnels drilled into the mountainside, many worried that the integrity of the mountains would be compromised. Others lamented that it would be painful to no longer be able to look upon the Ganga's flowing waters day in and day out. As one interlocutor declared in one of my follow-up visits, "No matter what happens, I need to see the Ganga flowing through this region. It gives me peace and strength." Another interlocutor declared herself to be a daughter of the Ganga, and understood the Ganga to be her mother; so saying, she tapped her fist to her chest and volunteered to defend the purity of the Ganga's freely flowing waters with her life.

## EARLY INVESTIGATIONS (AND COMPLICATIONS)

After those initial encounters, I became intent on understanding how people perceived the rise of hydroelectric development on the Ganga. I returned repeatedly to Uttarkashi and its surrounding villages to document the potential impacts that a reduction in flow would have on people and the cultural-religious practices that are dependent on accessing the Ganga.

It was in the summers of 2006 and 2007 that I learned about a set of social movements that emerged to contest the three newest dams. The town of Uttarkashi, which is also a district capital, was a central point of the dam opposition activity. Some of the activists I encountered lived in town, some had homes in villages closer to the dam construction sites, and some hailed from populated cities in the Indian plains. Most of the dam opponents identified as Hindu.

Even though the dam opponents I met expressed optimism that they could stop the dams, there were reasons specific to the projects, and to the legacy of dam building on the Ganga, that led many to believe that the struggle to stop the projects was futile. To begin, the three newest projects were not nearly of the

size and scale of the more controversial reservoir dams that fueled prominent oppositions from social and environmental activists in India's recent history. They were also not the kind of reservoir projects that submerge land and lead to widespread human displacement. Since diversion dams do not produce the artificial lakes of reservoir projects, they do not contribute to the production of methane that is caused when organic matter rots underwater; this helps propel the notion that diversion dams are an environmentally friendly form of "green development." Another difficulty for the opposition campaigns was in confronting the pervasive discourse that diversion dams offer an efficient way to augment municipal energy supplies in times of peak energy demand.<sup>2</sup> In contrast to "dirty coal," dams on the Ganga are set within a wider geopolitical effort to expand renewable energy production across the Himalaya. The goal is to tap into every available source of power to support and boost regional economic growth.<sup>3</sup> Finally, the claims against hydropower on the Ganga were somewhat weakened by the fact that several projects, including the reservoir dam at Tehri, had already been implemented on the river.

Even though the odds of success were not especially good, Hindu-identified activists from disparate socioeconomic milieus spent five years challenging the government's decision to build additional dams on the Ganga. Alongside their concerns for the Ganga's well-being, these activists wanted to defend the integrity of a landscape that holds cultural and religious significance for its prominent role in Hindu understandings of India's sacred geography. Many of those involved in the campaigns to stop the dams were motivated by a notion that it was their religious duty (sometimes referred to as their *dharmā*) to work on behalf of the Ganga and the Garhwal Himalaya. Others, it was rumored, had more politically oriented motivations.

The motivations and activities of my main interlocutors come into play in subsequent chapters, but here I briefly situate the context for their campaign participation. From as early as 2006, several of those living in proximity to the dam construction sites began coordinating village outreach and awareness-raising programs. One group, the Ganga Ahvaan, was affiliated with an ashram located downstream from the dam construction sites. Concerned by what the dams would mean for regional livelihoods, as well as for people's everyday cultural and religious practices, they went from village to village to speak with people impacted by the already underway construction. They spoke with rural mountain residents whose homes and fields were damaged by the tremors of controlled explosions used to forge diversion tunnels. In these conversations, they learned that

many men and women blamed the explosions for the deterioration of mountain springs; the blasting, these people stated, redirected the underground water networks so significantly that collection points ran dry.

The Ganga Ahvaan was not a “movement” in the standard sense. A translation of its title is the “Call of the Ganga” or “Ganga’s Call”; the phrasing is an appeal to the sentiments of river devotees to imagine how the goddess Ganga would want to be treated. It is also an invocation to work in the goddess’s service (*seva*) by protecting the waters that she embodies. Such appeals were effective in the recruitment of people in the Ganga Ahvaan network. These appeals also helped inspire the involvement of preexisting groups dedicated to the river’s service and protection. In the Garhwali District capital of Uttarkashi, for instance, Ganga Ahvaan events attracted participants of the Clean the Ganga movement (Ganga Safai Abhiyan), a group that coordinates events to remove rubbish from alongside the river before important Hindu holidays. These two networks collaborated on public demonstrations and media campaigns. From time to time, their efforts overlapped with the work of individuals from near and distant ashrams and with the campaigns of environmental groups and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs).<sup>4</sup>

There was, in short, a conglomeration of networks spread over a large stretch of North India that arose and occasionally joined forces.<sup>5</sup> Because the campaign participants came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and geographic locales within India, many campaign coordination efforts struggled to come up with a coherent platform. When they could organize large street rallies and protests, they attracted headlines in regional newspapers and in some circles of district and state government. The campaign participants were overjoyed every time they made the news. The female participants that I came to know, several of whom had low levels of literacy, combed the news after each rally and protest to cut out the articles that carried their images and their names. Each news article represented a small victory in the fight to share information about the cultural, religious, and ecological threats posed by the dams.

Women, in fact, were often the most eager to speak about the perceived threats that the dams posed. I explain more of the potential reasons for this in chapter 3; as a prelude to that content, I share here a representative explanation from an interlocutor that I will call Lakshmi. I first met Lakshmi in 2008 at her home, the location for which is a fifteen-minute walk uphill from the Ganga’s flow, in a village relatively close to the impending dams. Within minutes of our initial exchange, she laid out the rationale for her project concerns in a clear and

compelling statement: “We are Uttarkashi residents,” she began, “and Ganga is our most valuable heritage. She is needed for our birth, our death, and all the work that we do in our life . . .” Switching to the kinship framework indicated earlier, she stated: “We are very grateful to Mother. Out of her purity, we become pure every day.” Lakshmi further explained that along with the spiritual purification that the Ganga provides all her devotees, she also gives physical sustenance for the people of Uttarkashi. It is for these reasons, Lakshmi clarified, that she and others were working to stop the Ganga from “disappearing” (*vilupt hona*) into the diversion tunnels of the newest dams. A plea was also offered: “Let this river’s constant flow continue so that all devotees can come to our home [to enjoy the Ganga’s blessings].” In what was reflective of the ways in which several women shared their feelings about the Ganga’s importance, she then proceeded to share a song that praised the river and its goddess. I provide here the first three and last five lines to illustrate:

I bow to Mother Ganga.  
Every morning after getting up I repeat your name;  
I fold both my hands and, having seen you, I bow to you . . .  
Mother Ganga, you have supported us for ages and ages,  
And you liberate us from the ocean of sorrow,  
Not just the world but heaven bows at your feet.  
I also meditate at your feet.  
Say together: Victory to Mother Ganga!<sup>6</sup>

For women like Lakshmi, the dams jeopardized time-honored ways of revering the Ganga in a region fortunate to access its flow daily. It was this assertion that her song helped convey. Over the course of fieldwork, I would hear many such songs; I would also learn to listen to them for content, as well as for the emotions and motivations that they were meant to induce.

Despite the risks identified by people like Lakshmi, very few of my interlocutors took a stance that could be labeled as “anti-dam.”<sup>7</sup> With a rare exception, people spoke against hydroelectric development on the Ganga’s main flow through the Himalaya while qualifying that they were fine with small-to-moderately sized projects on other rivers (including the Ganga’s tributaries). Their reasons for this stance are a main point of exploration in the chapters that follow. What I want to stress here is that, time and again, people asserted that they were fighting to reshape discussions about what *kind of development* would

best suit the mountains and the people that live there. Their statements included qualifications that resource management decisions should safeguard the maintenance of cultural and religious practices.

The extent of this complexity was difficult for me to appreciate at first; one reason for this is that I do not particularly like dams and I initially set out to critique the wider project of hydroelectric development in the Himalaya. In holding this bias, I am certainly not alone among social scientists. Several anthropologists, cultural geographers, and sociologists offer texts that highlight how hydroelectric projects are oftentimes ill-conceived and poorly executed—not to mention detrimental for social, cultural, and ecological pathways (Arora 2009; Baviskar 1995; Fisher 1995, 2000; Johnston 2003, 2005, 2009, 2010, 2013; Kedia 2009; Khagram 2004; Kothari 1995; Oliver-Smith 2009; Ribeiro 1994; S. Singh 1997; Tilt 2015; Whitehead 2010). The picture gets more complicated when one takes into consideration the development desires and aspirations of the people living in varying proximities to the proposed, under construction, and implemented dam projects. While there are strong critiques of development that can be found in the Himalaya, these are often followed by statements of how development could better benefit mountain residents (Klenk 2010; Lord 2014; Pigg 1992; Rangan 2001; Sinha 2003).<sup>8</sup>

To be clear, I do not intend for this text to be read as an argument in favor of large Himalayan dams. The comments and statements of many interlocutors suggest that these projects, and especially the ones set along the upper Ganga, are unwise. While I remain critical of top-down development models, I seek to create space for discussion of the ways in which the perspectives and demands of mountain residents could be more actively engaged in development processes, as well as in debates over conservation. To add to the complexities observed, I also discuss the subjective processes experienced by my main interlocutors as they worked to contest development and/or conservation.

## **RIVER DIALOGUES: EMPIRICAL AND THEMATIC INCLUSIONS**

In thinking with the concerns of mountain residents, the discussion that follows contemplates the significance of hydroelectric development on the Ganga. It draws on sixteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted from 2007 to 2009 with two months of follow-up visits spread across 2011, 2012, and 2014. For

most of the research, I was based in Garhwal's Uttarkashi District. This location centers my investigation of men and women's dam concerns and movement involvements. Within the district, fieldwork took me to remote mountain villages, social movement protests, public meetings, and conferences in various locations. My emphasis on activist networks and policy debate additionally required several months of research in the capital city of New Delhi in 2009. The interviews, movement gatherings, and cultural events that I documented exposed me to a range of positions influenced by concerns for employment, tourism, development, and the welfare of the goddess Ganga.<sup>9</sup> Although I focused my time and attention on the actors involved in efforts to address development and environmental change in the Himalaya, I also documented the perspectives of dam proponents. These included daily wage earners, business owners, and politicians.

This book weaves the extensive experiences and conversations of fieldwork within a series of "river dialogues" to first and foremost illuminate the cultural politics of development along the Ganga. In this effort, I "follow the conflict" (as per Marcus 1995 and Rademacher 2011) to understand the dynamics of claim making among diverse actors and organizations operating on multiple levels as they attempt to influence the management of a revered resource. Since many of my key interlocutors were women, women's perspectives are highlighted in the book. The interludes that I offer between chapters chronologically emphasize the emotion and sacrifice that can energize women's efforts to engage in the cultural politics of development on the Ganga. The term *river dialogues* aims to flag how these encounters are important sites for exchange and learning. In highlighting women's worries over development, I additionally demonstrate how women influence processes within social movements in ways that can also impact public opinion about the value of dams in the Himalaya.<sup>10</sup>

When explaining the differences among mountain women who joined the campaigns,<sup>11</sup> I am attentive to the distinctions that varied socioeconomic and geographic backgrounds have in influencing people's motivations. Accordingly, I follow women from rural, semi-urban, and urban locations who bring particular perspectives and experiences. I show the gamut of concerns women brought to social movement processes and the struggles experienced by different women when working to assert their visions of development and environmental conservation.<sup>12</sup> I also look to the concerns and practices of mountain men to demonstrate the range of gendered concerns that brought people to the opposition campaigns.

Through hearing women's first-person accounts in the chapters of this book, our understandings of women's social movement experiences are enriched. We



learn why Radhika, a middle-aged woman living in the district capital of Uttarkashi, believes that it is her religious duty or dharma to defend the Ganga from diversion hydroelectric projects. We similarly meet Nirmala, a mother of two who initially defied her husband to join movement events where she recited poems and sang songs to remind others of the Ganga's cultural and religious significance. We come to understand how and why other women, such as Lakshmi, took up leadership roles in the dam opposition movement. The exploration of women's experiences also demonstrates that, contrary to expectations, their involvement in social movements was not always empowering or liberating. I contrast the affirming experiences of some activists with those of women such as Sarita, a village activist who struggled with the self-aggrandizing agendas of a few high-profile men. As I discuss, Sarita grew disillusioned when her vision for small hydroelectric dams was dropped in favor of movement leader demands that argued for the suspension of *all* development projects and the conversion of the area into an Eco-Zone.

When put together, the stories I share indicate a complicated social landscape that contrast with the simplified renditions of protest encounters that often make headlines. The incorporation of cultural, religious, and gendered concerns for the fate of a multivalent entity such as the Ganga helps to further expand analyses of environmental challenges to include how diverse connections with natural entities motivate social mobilization.

Before moving on to the main body of the text, I wish to note the decision I made about the presentation of Hindi terms. For ease of readership to an international audience, I neither use the Hindi script, *Devanaagari*, nor diacritics (which employ glyph, or accents, that provide additional pronunciation clues). Instead, I use simple transliterations. A main variation is that I use a double "a" construction to indicate the use of a long vowel sound that is called a *maatras* in Hindi. Some readers might have noticed this decision with the earlier presentation of the word *aarti*. Since I indicate the double vowel to aide with pronunciation, I refrain from writing "aa" when a *maatras* comes at the end of a word (otherwise *Ganga* would become *Gangaa*, etc.). I do this because such additions do not greatly impact the way a speaker might say that word aloud. For nouns that are frequently written in English, I go with the most common spelling. Examples of this include words like *Raja* (King), *Panchayat* (village council), and *ghat* (a landing point or place of worship along a waterway); these would otherwise be presented as *Raaja*, *Panchaayat*, and *ghaat*. Classics such as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are similarly presented in ways that readers will find familiar.

# RIVER DIALOGUES



# INTRODUCTION

## DAMS ON THE GANGA

### Movements and Countermovements

**O**N AUGUST 26, 2010, I received an e-mail with the following subheading: “Historical Victory of FAITH and CULTURE.” The message referred to the Indian government’s decision to cancel a controversial dam that was being constructed along a Himalayan portion of the River Ganga on a tributary known as the Bhagirathi.<sup>1</sup> Since two upstream dams were halted months earlier, the closure of the latest project meant that three dams in total were being scrapped. The e-mail included a letter signed by Pranab Mukherjee, the former finance minister of India, that situated the decision as a response to Hindu concerns for the Ganga’s welfare. More specifically, the letter noted that the project cancellations were part of an effort to honor the “special features and unique status of the sacred Ganga in our [Hindu] culture and in our daily lives.” The statement went on to affirm that the Ganga is the “very foundation” and “core” of Indian civilization. It also made the following concession: “Our Government is very conscious of the faith that crores [tens of millions] of our countrymen and women have in this most holy of rivers and it is in keeping with this faith that these decisions . . . have been taken” (Mukherjee 2010).<sup>2</sup> Reflecting on the news, the e-mail’s sender expressed his congratulations to those involved in the struggle to stop the proliferation of dams on the Ganga, a river that is framed as sacred within Hindu texts and is revered as a living goddess by devotees. He also expressed hope that the

decision reflects a move to rethink and redesign development policies so that they consider the “sociocultural impacts” of specific projects.

The government decision came as a surprise to me and to others. It was indeed a “historical” event with few precedents. For the last few decades of the twentieth century, in fact, India took an aggressive stance toward the promotion of hydroelectric development. Oftentimes, this involved overlooking or dismissing many of the social movement demands calling for the government to reassess the value of dam building. The reason for the emphasis on dam building was that it featured prominently in India’s development trajectory: hydroelectric development, an engineering feat and a symbol of progress, is tightly wound up in fervent debates about Indian approaches to development and modernization (Harriss 1998). The emphasis goes back to the early years following independence in 1947 when the leadership decided that the country could most expediently overcome the years of subjugation under British rule by becoming a world power. Words like *development*, *modernization*, and *industrialization* were subsequently used to promote a vision of how India might progress.<sup>3</sup> Influenced by the perception that industrialization would lift all proverbial boats, including those of India’s poor, Jawaharlal Nehru, India’s first prime minister, encouraged the construction of dams across the country and famously equated them with modern temples—a much-quoted utterance that nonetheless bears repeating. This dam-building valorization had significant consequences. By 2014, the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD) estimated that India housed a grand total of 5,102 large dams (ICOLD 2014).

Numerous river devotees, activists, and environmentalists celebrated the decision as a social movement triumph when it was announced. As a notice by International Rivers, a nonprofit environmental organization, stated on August 28, 2010, the “social movement success” resulted from the efforts of “hundreds of environmental, social justice, and religious activists” who called for the dams’ cancellation (Yan 2010). It also noted that many of these activists undertook fasts in opposition to the damming of the Ganga and its tributaries with the result that, in the aftermath of the government decision, the river can now flow freely. “This case,” the International Rivers representative asserted, “is an example of how people working together can stop destructive big dams” (ibid.). The communication further stated that the government also promised to create “India’s first dam-free zone” because of the ecological sensitivity of the area in which the dams were being built.

The idea that the dams were in an ecologically sensitive area was significant. Several movement leaders emphasized this point in their opposition campaigns. It was for this reason, as well as the actions of one man that I soon highlight, that the ruling government made an additional announcement in the August 2010 letter. Along with stopping the projects, the Indian government declared that the river's first 135 kilometers (84 miles) would eventually become an Ecologically Sensitive Zone (or Eco-Zone).<sup>4</sup> The decision included a moratorium on the construction of large dams as well as restrictions on industry. The aim was to conserve the landscape from degradation and to protect it for the enjoyment of future generations.

Along with many of my main interlocutors, I initially celebrated the dam cancelations and the Eco-Zone notification. I even wrote a book chapter that included a positive assessment of these decisions while emphasizing how important it was for people living in the Himalaya to maintain access to a free-flowing Ganga (Drew 2012a). By 2011, however, my reaction was tempered when I began to observe that some mountain residents—including some of the people who previously campaigned against the dams—were back in the streets. This time, they demanded that the dams be reopened and that the proposal to create an Eco-Zone be scrapped. What, I wondered, caused the rather dramatic reversal in opinion? This question forced me to return to the region for discussions and to reassess the data I collected between 2006 and 2010 during the height of the dam opposition campaigns. In the process, some arguments emerged that I had not fully appreciated. Whereas previously I focused on how people connected to the river and how their relationships to it inspired their social movement activism (Drew 2011), the change in opinion forced me to take a wider look at the livelihood issues at stake, as well as the inequity of the policy-making process.<sup>5</sup>

My expanded understanding of the complexities challenged me to adjust my conceptual approach to make better sense of the shifting sentiments. The controversy was about religion, but it was *not just* about religion. At the same time, the controversy was about the politics of ecology, but it was *not just* about the politics of ecology. To explain the complexity of the pendulum swings in opinion about the value of development and/or conservation along the Ganga, I needed to infuse religion into the politics of ecology.

This is my solution: In this book, I outline two key analytics that I see as essential for making sense of the tensions among movement participants and for understanding the change in opinion that some people expressed in the wake of

the government decision. The first analytic includes the cultural politics that fuel development contestations on a revered river such as the Ganga. My approach to cultural politics includes the varied perceptions of the river's importance that are informed by aspects of the Hindu faith. It also involves the ways that people position and reposition the significance of the Ganga itself. This includes how interlocutors attempt to decenter singular understandings of what makes the Ganga meaningful. The second analytic includes the wider political ecology of dams, development, and conservation in countries such as India. Political ecology is useful because it focuses on the disparate power dynamics that influence how certain practices, ideologies, and policies of resource management are promoted over others. It also emphasizes who gains and who loses from these processes. Together, these analytics highlight the struggles that people enact to question how entities such as the Ganga are valued and managed. By folding cultural politics into political ecology, *I make a central conceptual argument that political ecology requires more religiously attuned analyses, especially in cases when resources are revered.*<sup>6</sup>

## CONCEPTUAL MERGINGS: CULTURAL POLITICS AND POLITICAL ECOLOGY

To make these two analytics useful for understanding development debates along the Ganga, I also need to modify the scope of what is typically included in their use. Both cultural politics and political ecology have predominantly *secular* emphases that do not fully square with the *religious* sentiments associated with the Ganga. I assert that (a) cultural politics needs to be more inclusive of the kinds of agency informed by everyday religious belief and practice, and that (b) political ecology can benefit from folding into its analyses the insights of a cultural politics attuned to the influence of religion and to everyday religious practice. To give these main points a visual marker, my argument can be simplified as per figure 3.

### THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT

It is important to engage a cultural politics framework because it often entails the contests over meaning, value, and action that take place “on the ground” or “at the grassroots.” As it is commonly discussed in the existing literature, cultural politics

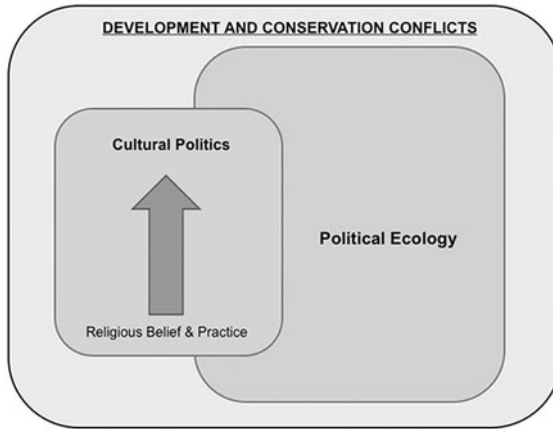


FIGURE 3. Conceptual Framework for River Dialogues

is evident when sets of social actors shaped by different structures and practices of meaning come into tension or conflict with one another. Cultural politics thus refers to a contentious terrain of social action wherein disparate social groups negotiate or renegotiate relations of domination or subordination (P. Jackson 1989, 2). As Sonia E. Alvarez, Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar (1998) explain, “culture” is political because the struggles over meaning that we enact are constitutive of processes that, implicitly or explicitly, seek to redefine social power (*ibid.*, 7). In addition to pointing out the collective process of how meanings are produced, cultural politics can also refer to attempts to upset a dominant cultural order with meanings and practices that are “marginal, oppositional, minority, residual, emergent, and alternative” (*ibid.*, 3). Donald Moore (2000) contends that development is a particularly potent site or “crucible” of cultural politics because of the complex and historically contingent articulations of the concept and its practices. One example of this is Thomas Perreault’s (2003) study of indigenous organizations in Ecuador engaging in cultural politics to mediate development, construct new identities, and contest existing power relations; another example is Rebecca Klenk’s work with women in the Uttarakhand Himalaya who engage in a type of cultural politics seeking to question how development is understood, appropriated, and produced (2010, 12). Put in this light, the cultural politics of development includes how people work to redefine and reshape its practices and parameters. It can even incorporate notions of “people-centered”



development and other “alternative” notions of development that Katy Gardner and David Lewis (1996) contend are important contributions that anthropology offers to critical development debates.

In much of the literature, cultural politics is evident in moments of collective opposition to dominant meanings and institutional apparatuses—a sort of David and Goliath struggle. This is no doubt a legitimate understanding of cultural politics. But in addition to the power struggles that manifest between different social groups, I find that cultural politics can also include points of tension and opposition that are internal to seemingly homogenous groups. For this reason, my interest in cultural politics includes points of discord among people with distinct or disparate perspectives that nonetheless work together in parallel or overlapping social movements.

My examination of the frictions and contests over knowledge within group processes is part of a larger effort to study conflict and factionalization within social movements that are often presented as cohesive and coherent. Like Terre Satterfield (2002), I seek to address contestations over resource management, as well as the ways that notions of relating to other humans and nonhumans are multiply interpreted and negotiated. This orientation to cultural politics tries to transcend the single organization or single focus of much collective action research in favor of broader examinations of the political and social fields of mobilizations where a “decentered” approach is useful (Edelman 2001; Holland, Fox, and Daro 2008; Wolford 2006). The schisms that emerge are often based in differences of daily practice as well as the disparate knowledge practices of people who come from distinct socioeconomic backgrounds.

The lens of cultural politics is helpful for illuminating several sociocultural processes evident in the dam oppositions, but it does not allow me to fully encapsulate the range of power dynamics and inequities that fuel some of the policy decisions and controversies. For this reason, I also employ a political ecology framework to explicate the disparate resource concerns and multi-scalar power struggles that a focus on cultural politics alone cannot as easily encapsulate.

## INFUSING POLITICAL ECOLOGY WITH RELIGIOUSLY ATTUNED CULTURAL POLITICS

Political ecology was once described as a field that combines the concerns of ecology with a broadly defined political economy (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987;

see also Bryant and Bailey 1997; Watts and Peet 1996). This was an apt description for early political ecology work as much of the initial scholarship described the economic drivers of specific environmental conflicts (Bryant 1992). Priority was often placed on issues of power linked to the larger political processes of the market and the state (Bengt 2011, 17). For instance, the efforts of early political ecologists demonstrated links between land tenure regimes, social marginalization, and various phenomena of environment change, such as soil erosion and deforestation (Paulson and Gezon 2005, 13). Some of these early political ecologists drew inspiration from the work of Karl Marx and pointed out various modalities of nonhuman and human exploitation amid the wider politics of environment (Wolf 1972). Interestingly, the early variants of political ecology emerged in response to critiques that cultural ecology (which argues that ecology shapes culture and vice versa) was insufficiently political in its efforts to understand human relationships with “nature.”<sup>7</sup>

Since this early work, political ecology has matured and now takes a more critical approach to some of its core terms and concepts. It now often operates with a nuanced orientation to the question of ecology, one that considers “nature” to be co-constituted by human activity (Escobar 1999).<sup>8</sup> “Nature” is not only always touched by human meanings, but it also has the capacity to be experienced in ways that justify its powers of agency and sentience. In addition to such points of discursive expansion within political ecology, new studies are seeking to explore the complex and overlapping ways in which landscapes are negotiated and affected by the actions of people operating at the scales of the household, the workplace, the community, and the state (Paulson and Gezon 2005, 13). This move involves efforts to address the meaningful cultural constructions of the world put forth by such actors. It is for these reasons that current research in political ecology continues to advance methods that help investigate the workings of knowledge, discourse, and practice within social movements, various kinds of institutions, and even national and global governments (*ibid.*).

Importantly, “political ecology is not one thing”; there is no single theory or analytical framework to which all political ecologists would subscribe (Bengt 2011, 17). Thus, political ecologists can choose to emphasize very different conceptual realms. Some, for instance, now place emphasis on the relevance of theories of practice for political ecology (Biersack 2006, 4). This move involves an effort to integrate the insights of scholars such as Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1990) into political ecology analyses. Of use for political ecology analyses is Bourdieu’s

argument that power is culturally and symbolically created and that, as such, it is constantly *re-legitimized* through interplays of agency and structure. This insight is apt for efforts to understand how social categories such as class and gender shape environmental conflicts.

This issue of agency, and the gender of the “agent,” is also central to the field of feminist political ecology. Among other things, feminist political ecology contends that gender is a critical dimension of inquiry in studies of resource conflict as it enables attention to the different bodily experiences of resource use, affect, and activism. Reflecting an intellectual debt to practice theory, feminist political ecology simultaneously aims to be attentive to differences of race, ethnicity, class, and caste as they manifest in resource conflicts (Elmhirst 2011; Rocheleau, Thomas-Slayter, and Wangari 1996; Truelove 2011). In their analyses, feminist political ecologists also argue that gender differences in resource access and knowledge have little to do with physical or physiological differences between men and women. Instead, these divergent experiences are seen as the products of socially and culturally created structural positions. As Paul Robbins explains, “‘Normal’ women’s work and ‘normal’ men’s work—what is expected of people based on their socially assigned gender—explains much about what women and men know in the environment, how much access they get to environmental systems, and their level of tolerance and resistance to environmental risks and burdens” (2004, 59). Assertions such as these become important for my own analyses in subsequent chapters when I address the role of gender in the oppositions campaigns that arose to challenge the proliferation of dams on the Ganga.

## REVISITING THE DAM CANCELATIONS (WHILE HANDLING RELIGION WITH CARE)

I came to think with cultural politics and political ecology while learning from the men and women with whom I spent time during my fieldwork. For this reason, this book’s examination of development and conservation dilemmas on the Ganga furthers an ethnographic engagement with those most often left out of the public debates about development: the residents living near the Ganga in the mountains of Garhwal. Here, however, I want to point out some of the tensions that emerged within the social movement campaigns that may have had an impact on how people responded to the dam cancelations and the implementation of the Eco-Zone. These tensions pertain to the activism of a specific devotee.

Despite the substantial investment of time and energy that mountain residents and their allies put into the regional dam opposition campaigns (as noted in the prelude and as discussed throughout this book), the credit for the dam cancelations ultimately went to one man. This person, Dr. G. D. Agarwal, made national headlines for putting his life on the line through a series of fast-unto-death campaigns (*bhukh hadtal*) intended to stop the proliferation of hydroelectric projects on the Ganga. When he first began his fasts in 2008, he was well into his seventies and he cut a frail, sympathetic figure in the images that circulated in the news. His dedication to defending the Ganga was compounded by numerous periods of hospitalization that resulted from his extended fasts. The efforts he undertook were so dramatic that each of his three main fasts from 2008 to 2010 made national headline news.

G. D. Agarwal used his time in the limelight to make a series of appeals on behalf of the river, which he repeatedly spoke of as Mother Ganga or *Ma Ganga*. When asked by a reporter to share his demands of the government, he tersely replied, “Don’t come between me and my mother.”<sup>9</sup> Although the trope of *Ma Ganga* is often assumed to be symbolic and figurative, G. D. Agarwal adamantly defended the river as not only his actual mother but also the physical guardian of Hindu culture (*sanskriti*) and tradition (*parampara*). In a speech delivered to a gathering of dam opponents in January 2009, he declared that the river “is the life (*jaan*) of Indian culture and those who do not believe in Ganga cannot be considered as Indians.” He suggested that because the river is the mother of Hindus, devotees cannot stand idle as the Ganga is destroyed for the petty gains of energy production promised by the dams. Rather, he asserted, they should rise to defend their mother and strike down “with cruelty” those who act against her welfare. G. D. Agarwal’s admonishment extended to Hindu devotees and religious pilgrims who visit important sites along the Ganga but do not actively work to conserve and protect the river.<sup>10</sup>

G. D. Agarwal’s calls to save the Ganga contained elements of an exclusionary us-versus-them framework that presented the struggle to defend the river as a fight to safeguard the very essence of Hindu faith from the people and forces that presumably seek to destroy its integrity (G. D. Agarwal 2008). He criticized the efforts of engineers, scientists, and politicians for treating the Ganga (which he refers to as *Gangaji* using the honorific modification of *ji*) like any other river. He firmly asserted, by contrast, that the Ganga is “no ordinary river” (*ibid.*, 3). Unlike the Nile, Euphrates, Thames, Danube, Mississippi, or even the Indus, he declared, “No one craves to visit any of these rivers, their origin, their

confluence, or any spots on them, as crores of Hindus crave for Gangaji. They want to be near Gangaji even in death . . .” (ibid., 3). Considering the Ganga’s poor treatment, he wrote, “It is obvious that what science has done has biased, even fouled, our minds against everything that our sages said or believed. And poor Gangaji has been an easy prey” (ibid., 5). G. D. Agarwal made no apologies for his stance. In an interview I conducted during his second fast in 2009 in New Delhi, he defended his tactics as an effective means to appeal to Hindu religious sentiments.

G. D. Agarwal appeared soft-spoken and humble when we spoke in a New Delhi complex dedicated to celebrating the Hindu faith. Sporting a long white beard and a plain wool cap, he reclined with his back against the wall and his legs stretched out on the thinly cushioned floor of a small room near the back of the complex. With a series of posters of the Ganga’s Himalayan flow hanging above his head, he adeptly simulated the image of a Gandhian activist, a person inspired by the call to the simple and morally upstanding livelihood embodied by Mohandas Gandhi. In addition to Gandhian ideals, G. D. Agarwal also upheld the penance and sacrifice of his Hindu ancestors when explaining the reasons why he undertook a fast-unto-death for the cause of stopping dams on the Ganga. By way of explanation, G. D. Agarwal spoke of the similar sacrifices made by the legendary King Bhagirath.

Hindu mythologies, varied as they are, share a common notion that the Ganga was brought down to the earth from her abode in the heavens at the bequest of King Bhagirath, a mortal who underwent extreme self-sacrifice to win the soul-purifying blessings of the goddess’s waters. The story’s significance is vast, layered, and a source of motivation for a variety of dam opponents (as I will explain in subsequent chapters). For G. D. Agarwal, King Bhagirath’s legacy was pivotal; it guided his resolve to put his own life in jeopardy to ensure that the Ganga continues to flow freely and bless current and future Hindu generations. Going against the notion that he was merely inspired by Gandhian ideals, G. D. Agarwal claimed in our interview that he chose to fast to revert to a method which is well accepted in Hindu “culture.” He expressed optimism that it would force change by stating, “I have full faith that penance of this type will do two things: One, which may be unlikely, is intervention by the almighty or the universal energy. But there is a second aspect: that it may arouse the conscience of some of those people who feel in the same way. And probably, there will be a stronger demand for what I am standing [up for].”

G. D. Agarwal's appeal to religiosity was a source of consternation for some secular opponents to dam building, as my interviews and recorded conversations with environmentalists attest. The concern was amplified by the fact that G. D. Agarwal was trained as an environmental engineer and he had taught at the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology (IIT) in Kanpur for much of his adult life. During our 2009 interview, when I asked why he did not focus his contestations on the environmental and scientific knowledge of his discipline, G. D. Agarwal stated that in his advanced age, and after years spent observing the nature of populism in Indian politics, he did not believe that facts, figures, and scientific certitudes could change public opinion and policy. He argued that it was primarily the "nonmaterial" points of concern that were more likely to be influential in forcing the government's hand.

The former professor made these comments shortly after chastising India's democracy, which he criticized as an ineffective system that pandered to the whims of a primarily ignorant populace. Given his skepticism that the "common man" can make wise decisions for the protection of the Himalaya and the Ganga, he reiterated that it is the "responsibility of a few enlightened men" to take the appropriate actions. For G. D. Agarwal, this was even more important because government officials, even when they are not at the will of popular opinion, are often shortsighted. Instead of protecting culture and religion, he insisted, they will prioritize development, international political economy, foreign relations, and "that sort of thing."

As if to prove G. D. Agarwal's assertion, the first time the government indicated that it would put a stop to the dams was after his second high-profile fast in February of 2009. Worried about his deteriorating condition after thirty-eight days without eating, the government offered an assurance that the three high-altitude dams on the Ganga would be suspended. They also promised to appoint an expert-level committee to visit the construction sites and conduct cultural impact and cost-benefit analyses. When they wavered in their resolve to make a final decision on the dams, G. D. Agarwal went on a third prolonged fast in 2010 that culminated in an assurance that his demands would be met. Even as some cheered the decision, such as those whose views were reflected in the opening e-mail and the International Rivers announcement, others questioned the means through which this policy change was achieved. Such commentators told me that they felt that the nation was taken "hostage" by a one-man campaign. These same people also suggested that there were worrisome Hindu politics underscoring the decision.

TABLE 1. Conflict Over Himalayan Dams on the Ganga:  
A Timeline from 2005 to 2012

|                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                   |
|-------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 2005–2006         | Dam construction becomes visible at Loharinag Pala and Pala Maneri sites; individuals and groups begin discussing concerns and forming a response.                                                                                                                                                                |
| 2006–2007         | As dynamite blasting picks up, concern grows; village-level and social movement campaigns begin to emerge with greater visibility.                                                                                                                                                                                |
| June 30, 2008     | G. D. Agarwal's hunger strike against the dams is canceled after 18 days when the government suspends the Bhairon Ghati and Pala Maneri projects.                                                                                                                                                                 |
| November 4, 2008  | The Ganga is declared the National River of India.                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                |
| February 20, 2009 | G. D. Agarwal's second hunger strike against the dams is canceled after 38 days when the government suspends the Loharinag Pala project.                                                                                                                                                                          |
| February 20, 2009 | Prime Minister Manmohan Singh establishes the National Ganga River Basin Authority to abate pollution and promote the river's conservation.                                                                                                                                                                       |
| July 8, 2010      | The government signals that it will allow the Loharinag Pala project to go ahead despite earlier assurances. In protest, G. D. Agarwal embarks on a third fast on July 20, 2010 to force the government's hand.                                                                                                   |
| August 24, 2010   | G. D. Agarwal's third hunger strike against the dams is canceled after roughly 35 days when the government announces a decision to "totally scrap the Loharinag-Pala Hydel Project." The notification includes a promise to declare the 135 kilometers from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi an Ecologically Sensitive Zone. |
| December 18, 2012 | The first stretch of the Ganga (the Bhagirathi Ganga) is notified as an Ecologically Sensitive Zone by the Union Environmental Ministry. The zone includes a total area of 4,180 kilometers and a watershed of 100 kilometers (62 miles).                                                                         |

## ENVIRONMENT VERSUS RELIGION? GREEN AND/OR SAFFRON?

Within anthropological circles, the unqualified use of terms such as *culture* and *tradition* puts people ill at ease even though these notions are ostensibly the bed-rocks of the discipline. The hesitation is well merited when one considers G. D. Agarwal's use of Hindu "culture" and "tradition" to situate the protest of hydro-electric dams on the Ganga. These appeals serve as signals that G. D. Agarwal held possible sympathies with a conservative faction of Hindu politics. Indeed, the location of his second fast was the Hindu Mahasabha Bhawan, a complex known to house conversations and events associated with political groups such as the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP or Universal Hindu Council).<sup>11</sup> Among other things, this organization is interested in promoting Hindu culture and faith, and their efforts are often described as a form of religious politics associated with Hindu nationalism (van der Veer 1994). These nationalist politics assert a "fundamental character of the nation-state" of India, constituted by a notion of "Hinduness" (sometimes written by scholars as "Hindu-ness") that is premised on historical claims about the land of India being first and foremost for a set of people broadly defined as Hindu (Chatterjee 1992, 111).<sup>12</sup> The definition of Hindu, it must be noted, extends to Buddhists, Jains, Sikhs, and "Tribals" (Adivasis)—people presumed to have a bloodline connection to the land that is now India. Muslims and Christians may coexist on Hindu soil, but according to the perspective of Hindu nationalists they must live in compliance with the dominant ideologies, practices, and agendas of Hindus (Mawdsley 2005; Lud-den 1996).

G. D. Agarwal's potential sympathies and alliances might direct some to focus solely on the role of Hindu nationalism in opposition campaigns that worked to stop the three high-altitude dams on the Ganga. This relationality is something that others have examined when analyzing a similar series of dam protests that emerged between the 1970s and early 2000s when the Tehri project was being built on the Ganga. Scholars such as Emma Mawdsley (2005) evaluated the Hindu tropes deployed in the dam opposition campaigns at Tehri to argue that, in the context of increasingly aggressive Hindu nationalism, environmental issues and movements are by no means immune from the dangerous and divisive Hindu nationalist politics that are being played out in contemporary India. Her resulting analysis argued that there was an "abuse of religion and ecology" evident in



the Tehri dam oppositions wherein green issues were leveraged by Hindu leaders “to promote the chauvinist agenda of Hindu nationalism” (ibid., 2). Another commentator, Mukul Sharma, agreed with Mawdsley, adding that, in the Tehri dam oppositions, certain metaphors and myths about the river’s role as a spiritual centerpiece in Hindu culture acted as “Trojan horses” through which religious politics entered and re-entered green politics (2009, 37). This religious politicization harnesses an “aggressive” Hindu identity based on the Ganga’s preservation that creates spaces of exclusion and hostility against non-Hindus—particularly Muslims—and the paranoid conception of a “conspiring West” (ibid., 40). For this reason, Mukul Sharma adamantly declared that the conjoining of the environmental movement with a “fundamentalist Hindu right” represents the dangerous blurring of “green and saffron.” In this formulation, green represents the environmental movement, and saffron is a reference to the emblematic colors that serve as a synonym for the more conservative forms of Hindu nationalism. The alliance between these two fields, Mukul Sharma asserted, involves compromise and a loss of principle among diverse stakeholders that otherwise might hold divergent perceptions about dams and the project of development.

Emma Mawdsley’s and Mukul Sharma’s observations call for caution when looking at the role of religion in social responses to the proliferation of development on sacred rivers. I concur that polarizing discourses and actions should be handled with care to guard against the promulgation of dangerous exclusions and xenophobia. Yet, while they are right to identify the conservative political motivations that can enter some movements, their critiques focus on the role of Hindu-identified leaders within the social movement campaigns. This carries the risk of overlooking the nuanced factors that motivate the relatively less visible activists who join such campaigns. In the conflicts over the three high-altitude dams on the upper Ganga that I studied, many Himalayan residents living in proximity to the river expressed motivations that included deep personal attachments to the Ganga based on relationships forged in daily practice. Even though these relationships are dialectically produced by the Hindu “traditions” with which the Ganga is associated, those time-honored practices do not predetermine the nature of human connection and care for the river. Concern for the maintenance of those practices (or traditions) does not mean that everyone involved in the dam oppositions was guilty by association of being connected to Hindu nationalist politics. As I explain in chapters 1 and 2, the Ganga’s framing in Hindu mythology might alert people to the goddess’s importance, but it is the cumulative effect of their everyday interactions and connections with the

divine entity that can solidify the means and manners in which the river obtains its deepest significances. These can depart in marked ways from understandings of the Ganga's importance in Hindu texts. Whereas there may be undertones of Hindu nationalist politics in some of the dam oppositions, there is also a politics of everyday religious belief and practice that must be considered.

These qualifications mean that I take inspiration from, but also move cautiously with, the field of Hinduism and Ecology. Hinduism and Ecology includes efforts to examine the environmental applications of Hindu belief (see, for instance, Chapple 2000; Chapple and Tucker 2000). The field has shown that there are many religious texts that urge reverent and environmentally sound behavior. It has also demonstrated how people who identify as Hindu are coming to think in ecologically proactive ways. Some framing of the Hindu faith and of Hinduism is needed to allow further clarification.

## STARTING WITH, BUT MOVING BEYOND, HINDUISM AND ECOLOGY

To explore the realms of everyday belief and practice, my examination of the motivations of mountain residents protesting dams on the Ganga involves considering multiple orientations to the Hindu faith, also known as Hinduism. After all, as Chapple writes, "Within Hinduism can be found many gods and goddesses; many competing belief systems, from atheistic materialism to profoundly emotional deistic devotion; various systems of prayer and meditation; and countless groupings and subgroupings of deities and of people" (2000, xxxix).<sup>13</sup> What we consider Hinduism—sometimes referred to in Hindi as *sa-naatana dharma*—is highly varied and amorphous. It is the product of an amalgamation of countless oral teachings, of many books, and of numerous rituals and devotional practices that result from extensive acculturation processes spanning the last several millennia.<sup>14</sup>

The variation of Hindu belief and practice is something that is prominent in the Garhwal Himalaya (the region in which the three canceled dams were situated). In this part of India, regionally distinct practices of devotion to minor tree-dwelling and shrine-dwelling gods and goddesses persist (Sax 1990) alongside the worship of, and possession by, mytho-historical figures such as the Pandavas (Sax 2002), and alongside practices of animal sacrifice that would be considered taboo in other parts of Hindu-identified India (Govindrajan 2015).

Increasingly, the “village Hinduism” that might have characterized this part of the world is morphing with scripture-based Sanskrit, Vedic Hinduism of the “great tradition” variety that is represented by Brahmin priests and swamis living in the Indian plains (Chapple 2000, xxxix; see also Nandy 2008). Such mixing and hybridity is also influenced by greater literacy rates and increased exposure to media through television and the Internet. This suggests that there are multiple sources of inspiration for how Garhwali Hindus understand the Ganga’s importance and the threats that hydroelectric projects pose to the river and its goddess.

As complicated as the Hindu faith is to definitively explain, efforts to pinpoint its parameters become even more fraught when questions of environmental resource management are added. On the one hand, numerous scholars have argued that in its doctrine and teachings Hinduism contains several calls to respect nature and to conserve entities such as sacred rivers, forests, and mountains. The field of Hinduism and Ecology has shown that there are many religious texts that urge reverent and environmentally sound behavior (Chapple 1993, 1998; Chapple and Tucker 2000; Coward 1998; Dwivedi 2000; Grim and Tucker 2014; Jain 2011; Nelson 1998). These Hindu ways of seeing and being in the world, it is believed, can help in the goal of promoting sound or sustainable environmental practices. This ties into a larger field often referred to as religion and ecology, although there are disagreements over how “green” religions are currently, and over what it would take for their “greening” to occur (Berry 2015; Devine and Deneulin 2011; Gosling 2001; Jenkins and Chapple 2011; Sponsel 2001, 2012; Taylor 2009, 2016; Taylor, Wieren, and Zaleha 2016)

On the other hand, many scholars of the relationship between Hinduism and ecology point out that contemporary practices conducted alongside sacred natural resources, including the Ganga and Yamuna Rivers, lead to their environmental degradation. They argue that this reveals limits to a reliance on religious precepts for the sound management of resources, and they assert that we need to examine the wider social, economic, and political landscapes that influence resource use (A. Agarwal 2000; Ahmed 1995; Alley 1998, 2000, 2002; Drew 2012; Haberman 2006; Nagaranjan 1998). Other scholars also remind us that, because some forms of Hindu nationalism can be violent, the defense of Hindu ways of inhabiting the world—even if they are used to promote environmentally sound practices—must be tempered with an acknowledgment of the political context in which such defenses emerge.<sup>15</sup>

It is for the reasons stated that this book describes in detail the diverse motivations expressed by mountain people working to save the Ganga from hydroelectric dams, as well as the ways that they navigated movement campaigns to voice their concerns. While there were conservative Hindu undertones to some of the discourses aired and promoted, I assert that the sources of inspiration for mountain residents could significantly depart from those of the Hindu-identified figures who reside in the Indian plains. The concerns of mountain residents are oftentimes grounded in knowledge of how the redirection of the Ganga's water would impact everyday rhythms, meaning-making practices, and livelihood options. The examination of these preoccupations also reveals how mountain-based campaign participants were capable of producing perceptions about the project of development and about the kinds of available development alternatives that differed from those proposed by the plains-based activists. This became evident when G. D. Agarwal pushed for the creation of an Eco-Zone. The resulting controversy reveals how important it is to include more voices in the kinds of high-level discussions that were set into motion by G. D. Agarwal's actions.

The friction and discord among self-identified Hindus within the movement(s) is significant because it offers a note of caution to scholarly analyses that either dismiss the role of religion in concerns of development and conservation or seemingly overstate the connection. Instead, I challenge observers of environmental campaigns to acknowledge the contingency, ambiguity, and positive political potential inherent in lived experiences of devotion to sacred entities that are also natural resources.

## **CHAPTER ORGANIZATION: KNOWING, LOVING, DEFENDING, SAVING, AND ECO-ZONING THE GANGA**

To examine the different ways that people make claims on the Ganga, this text first investigates divergent ways of knowing the river. In chapter 1, I introduce debates about why and how the Ganga is important as a body of water and a source of hydroelectric power, as well as a site of cultural and religious sustenance. This first chapter offers an in-depth discussion of the geopolitics of hydropower development in the Himalaya and the notion put forward by some dam proponents that the Ganga can and should be tapped for energy like any other river.

I show why such statements are infuriating for river devotees. I also contrast the grand narratives of the Ganga's importance that are proffered from the Indian plains with the everyday encounters and experiences of people living in mountain locations such as Uttarkashi. The discussion includes the cautions and rebuttals of dam proponents and environmentalists who express reverence for the river but whose ways of knowing lead to different positions on how the Ganga (and other sacred rivers) should be treated. The disparate claims are part and parcel of the cultural politics that influence policy debates and outcomes.

The emphasis on cultural politics is maintained in chapter 2 through the focus on the multiple meanings and values associated with the Ganga. Chapter 2 highlights the emotional attachments expressed by women living in the district capital of Uttarkashi for the River Ganga and explains the means through which these sentiments are fostered. This exploration is grounded in an effort to understand how people come to know the river in divergent ways because of gendered differences of everyday practice and different orientations to the Hindu faith. Semi-urban women often experienced the Ganga and expressed their concerns about its fate through the cultural medium of devotional song. Devotional song, or *bhajan*, is part of centuries-old practices of expressing faith in the Ganga; it also helps instruct women on the Ganga's value to their everyday cultural and religious lives. I explore the use of this cultural medium to explain the emotional connections with the Ganga expressed by specific women in the town of Uttarkashi. As I state throughout the text, I make no claims that women have an innate or "natural" connection to natural resources and sacred entities. Rather, I make the assertion that knowledge of the Ganga and its cultural, religious, and ecological significance is often fostered in practices enacted daily.

Chapter 3 focuses on the diverse notions of care for the Ganga enacted by rural and semi-urban women. I examine why women have disparate abilities to engage in the river's defense because of the imbalanced economic opportunities available in a region marked by high rural workloads and high rates of male out-migration to towns and cities. My main aim is to show that, when it comes to mobilization, there are several cultural-religious and livelihood reasons why women choose either to defend the Ganga or to abstain from doing so. Many of these reasons relate to memories of past movements in Garhwal. Some of these campaign legacies are remembered positively and are an inspiration; some of these campaigns are remembered negatively and are a deterrent (especially for women living in the rural areas).

My examination of the challenges entailed in sustaining rural livelihoods leads me to question the dominant environmental discourse of conservation in chapter 4. Before one can ask the question of exactly how to best protect Himalayan resources, it is perhaps necessary to ask the more contentious question: For whom exactly do we undertake the project of protection? By exploring the tensions between mountain residents and the plains-based actors who concerned themselves with the Ganga's management, this chapter explores how activists' ideas and actions clashed. I examine disagreements over the methods chosen to contest the dams, the degree to which some Hindu religious frames overshadowed ecological concerns, and the distinct ways in which people engaged in ongoing debates over hydroelectric development in the Himalaya. Toward the end of the chapter, I address the impact of these processes on the implementation of policies, such as the creation of the National Ganga River Basin Authority. The effort is meant to examine how the concerns of mountain residents were included or omitted at the policy level.

Chapter 5 investigates reactions to the Eco-Zone that was instituted along the Ganga's flow in Uttarakhand's Bhagirathi Valley. The Eco-Zone was, to my knowledge, not a request initiated by mountain residents; rather, it was crafted and demanded by a select number of movement leaders. Among these, G. D. Agarwal was the main spokesperson, joined by several activists who later worked with government officials to determine the parameters of the Eco-Zone and the ways that it would be implemented. This had implications for how the policy was received. Mountain residents worried that the kind of exceptionalism embodied in the Eco-Zone would reify policies aimed at keeping the Himalaya "pristine" at the expense of livelihoods. In sentiments that echo the work of Haripriya Rangan (2000a), some residents argued that the Eco-Zone would promote the "museumization" of an imagined, rather than a lived-in, landscape.

Whereas Eco-Zones may appear to some to be the outcome of sustainability thinking and proactive environmental conservation, I argue that the Eco-Zone created along the Ganga may, in reality, lead to a suite of undesirable outcomes. Although the Eco-Zone itself might be successfully executed on paper, it will face numerous challenges on the ground. If it is not viewed as assisting the people living in the region in their everyday struggles and livelihood challenges, it will be poorly received and disregarded. If, over time, it is deemed to have restricted the development desires and aspirations of mountain residents, then the Eco-Zone could even inspire more activism in favor of dam building—a radical

pendulum swing back to the right. This would continue to hinder and tarnish much-needed conversations about culturally and regionally appropriate resource management strategies.

Despite good intentions, the creation and implementation of the Eco-Zone has mirrored the approach to dam proliferation. Both began when a small group of people agreed on a policy prescription and then went about enacting it with little public input. This does not bode well for either the current Eco-Zone or any others that do not adequately consider the insights and needs of people living in the regions targeted for conservation. The other problem is that Eco-Zones are themselves limited responses to dire systemic problems. When they are designed in faraway urban centers that voraciously consume Himalayan resources, such policies smack of not only hypocrisy but also a failure to reflect on the costs and limits of state-sponsored demands for growth. Unless growth models are configured to avoid overexploitation of mountain resources, the partitioning of specific sites will do little to protect the region overall. It may be time, moreover, to examine how downstream urban centers could be refashioned as Eco-Zones instead of the relatively low-impact Himalaya.

What complicates arguments in favor of, and against, Eco-Zones in the Himalaya are the substantial ecological changes that are taking place. In chapter 5 and the epilogue, I discuss the impact of two flash floods that devastated the Garhwal Himalaya and hampered the lifeways of hundreds of thousands of people living along the Ganga and Alaknanda Rivers. Such floods point to the precariousness experienced by people in the mountains and highlights the need for development policies that ensure the flourishing of mountain livelihoods. In the short term, it appears that the contested dams were indeed unsustainable. After all, rivers such as the Ganga have the capacity to both starve the dams of the waters needed to generate electricity and overwhelm their cement walls, like sand castles flooded by a rising tide. At the same time, people need houses, they want electricity, and they desire nonagricultural employment. What options are available to provide these things without overly upsetting the sociocultural and ecological resources that give meaning to everyday life? I look to the comments of a few mountain residents to find possible answers.

Collectively, the chapters aggregate into a text that argues for a religiously attuned political ecology (arrived at via cultural politics). It also interweaves multiple temporal, spatial, and cultural layers to highlight the need for livelihood-centric policies that do not needlessly vacillate between the extremes of the development-conservation binary.

# PART I

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## CULTURAL POLITICS





# INTERLUDE

## PLEASE JOIN US

**A**UGUST 8, 2007: "Do people in America think about Ganga?" The question draws me away from fiddling with my recording device, and I raise my head to meet the gaze of the Garhwali women sitting cross-legged on the floor in front of me. Looking into my questioner's eyes, I sense that she is comfortable, that she feels confident in my presence. Perhaps it is because we are meeting in an ashram near her village and we are speaking in Hindi. Perhaps it is because the residents of the ashram where we are meeting are encouraging her, even counting on her, to help them raise awareness about the threats to the River Ganga in the other villages. Then again, it could just be her nature. In contrast to the more demure woman sitting at her side, I can tell that she will steer the conversation. Putting the recorder down, I turn my attention to this woman, whom I will call Sarita. I notice what a determined presence she cuts with her small, thin frame. Looped around the top of her head is a cotton scarf checkered in yellows and reds. Her sari-blouse (*choli*) is mustard yellow; it is uncovered and the buttons are visible. In keeping with the attire of Garhwali village women, she has tied the bulk of her royal blue sari at the waist instead of draping the extra fabric across the chest and over the shoulder. Displaying the form of a woman's chest would be taboo in many other parts of the country, but in this region of the Himalaya it is fairly common. A thick, red wool cloth wraps around her midsection, serving as an oversized belt that women wear to support their backs as they go about their daily regimens of collecting and hauling wood and fodder from the mountain forests.

Sensing that I am meant to affirm her question, I nod and reply positively in Hindi (*haahn*) so that she can continue to a point she seems ready to make. My response animates Sarita, and she uses it to contrast the concern that outsiders ostensibly have for the river with the treatment it receives in India. "People here," she continues, "they want to corrupt the Ganga. They want to take the water inside the mountain. They are throwing lots of waste (*gandagi*) in the river. Not many people are supporting us."

I again nod my head in comprehension. For a moment, I wonder how Sarita got the impression that foreigners are concerned with the Ganga's fate. Then I remember my context, and I look over to the five or six foreigners dressed in white who are busy cooking and making soap in the adjoining kitchen of the rustic yet artfully designed wood building in which we are seated. Constructed with materials and labor donated by the ashram's residents, the structure is crafted with fine details. The room features several large windows that line the walls; natural light illuminates the room except when it is intermittently cut off by the rustling of tree leaves outside. Our proximity to the river means that the sounds of the Ganga—the rushing, gushing, and humming—are omnipresent. When the breeze passes through the open doors, the smell of pine mixes with the aroma of freshly baked bread cooling nearby.

The topic that has instigated our interview is the nearby dam construction, against which small-scale opposition activities accelerated in 2006. The ashram, which will go unnamed, has even instigated what they are calling Ganga Ahvaan or the Call of the Ganga. I am interested in the dam but, in this first exchange with Garhwali women involved in the dam opposition campaigns, I am more curious to know what women think about the river and what is at stake if they lose access to its continuous flow. I am initially not very successful at leading them to talk about these issues, and I come to understand that they think I am here to support their opposition activities. They tell me about all the officials they have gone to see and all the protests they have planned. They talk of the villagers who support them and of those that do not. Since women are most intricately involved in the procurement and utilization of water in village households (and the men, they say, are drunks), it is mostly women who express solidarity. "All the women from around here should fight," Sarita declares, gesturing with an upward swoop of her hand. "Women can do everything. Women have rights; they have laws (on their side). All women are with you. Please come with us."

I thank them for the invitation and explain that I am interested in joining them at some later stage; first I want to understand their motivations for taking part in the campaigns. What compels them to join the movement activities when they are otherwise busy with household work, animal caretaking, and agricultural chores? In response,

Sarita gives an explanation that draws from the mythology of how a human, King Bhagirath, brought the Ganga down to earth:

We shouldn't build dams because then they will block Ganga. When they build the dam, Ganga will go inside the tunnels and this whole valley will become desolate (*sunsaan*). We have a deep relationship with Gangaji from our birth that lasts until our death. King Bhagirath did so much penance (*tapasya*) to bring Ganga to earth. But he did not say that it should be taken inside tunnels. In fact, he said that it will keep flowing for ages and ages and it will give redemption (*uddhaar*) to each and every one. This is very painful for us. For us, this is not good. Please note this down.

They fought to defend their mother, Sarita lamented, but few listened. Instead, they were told that some minister had already approved the dams and thus the projects could not be stopped. Sarita contemplated the poor reception of their demands with her head cast down. Then she looked at me and made a comment that showed hope: "They tell us the dams cannot be canceled," she said, "but I think this minister will also have a mother." Sarita smiled knowingly at this point, affirming the possibility that the river's place in Hindu hearts as a guardian, protector, and maternal figure would eventually triumph.

# 1

## KNOWING THE GANGA

### How a River Is “Many Things”

IT IS DIFFICULT, IF NOT IMPOSSIBLE, to capture the multiplicity of meanings attached to a water body such as the Ganga. The river is at once a flow of liquid nourishment, a potential purveyor of hydroelectricity, a source of personal solace, a cultural mother, and a living goddess. Sarita's comments in the interlude reflect these multiplicities while showing how they create differing visions of how the Ganga should be managed. It is because of the contestations emerging from the river's many symbolisms and uses that an emphasis on cultural politics helps examine the circulation of the river's significances, as well as the ways that they are differentially leveraged. At the heart of many cultural politics analyses are the struggles that people enact when asserting meanings and values in relation to specific entities, practices, ideologies, and policies. Thinking with the Ganga's multiplicities is useful for examining conflicts over resource management since, as Anna Tsing argues, “the agency of nature develops in tandem with human abilities to know it and manage it in particular ways” (2001, 6).

To begin outlining the cultural politics of development on the Ganga, this chapter starts with an exploration of the river's importance to economic and material practices. The discussion includes the river's potential contributions to hydropower development and energy production. The view-from-a-distance of the Ganga's hydroelectric potential constitutes a way of knowing and perceiving the

river as a state resource and as an engine of commercial and industrial growth. Later in the chapter, when transitioning to the river's more-than-material significances, I introduce additional ways of knowing the Ganga that influence the cultural politics at play. The first domain encompasses the place-based and regional ways of connecting with the river as it flows through the town of Uttarkashi and the ethnolinguistic region of Garhwal in the Uttarakhand Himalaya. The second related domain is the relationship between the river's ecological integrity and its religious integrity; this is made evident in the value that river devotees attach to the maintenance of the river's uninterrupted flow. In the third domain, I show the ways in which some dam proponents argue in favor of hydroelectric development while still invoking the river's religious importance. Finally, I discuss the concerns of environmentalists who worry about maintaining the ecological systems surrounding and including the Ganga. These differing views of the Ganga and its key attributes spar in at-times subtle and at-times pronounced ways. The interchange of varied epistemologies is a significant part of the circulation of river dialogues; they also help explain how distinct ways of knowing the Ganga and its importance are influenced by differences in the scale of interaction and everyday practices among actors with divergent socioeconomic backgrounds and livelihood opportunities.<sup>1</sup>

## GANGA'S MATERIAL SIGNIFICANCE

The Ganga is one of the world's most renowned water resources. It is also an entity vitally important to the materiality and sustenance of everyday life. Flowing some 2,510 kilometers (1,560 miles), what is commonly considered the main stretch of the Ganga begins in the Himalayan region of northwestern India and travels southeast to meet the ocean at the Bay of Bengal. As a source of water for households, agriculture, and navigation, it is the largest and most important watershed in India, covering a total area of 861,404 square kilometers (332,590 square miles). With one-half of the total area of the Ganga basin under cultivation, and with one-third of this land irrigated (Harding et al. 2013, 85), the Ganga basin is one of the most intensely farmed areas in the world (Sulser et al. 2010, 277). Thus, the river helps to nourish roughly 460 million people living in the basin in nearly seven hundred towns and cities distributed over ten states (ibid.; see also Acciavatti 2015). Its role in the sustenance and growth of human

populations extends back millennia. Perhaps for this reason, and as a sign I once saw near the river in Varanasi proclaimed, the Ganga is called the “life-line of Indian culture.”

The vast cultivation of the land in the Ganga basin is a feat made possible by canal irrigation, some of which was implemented during British colonial rule. The canal irrigation and micro hydel (small dam) projects that were instituted along the Ganga from the late 1800s onward took place despite the long-standing practices of reverence for the river. Although there are indications that some of the projects met with local opposition, there are also indications that canal irrigation on the Ganga helped to expand agriculture into the northern Doab, resulting in a boom of production in foodstuffs and market commodities (Stone 1984; Whitcombe 1972). Since that period, the river has continued to supply resources to produce Indian goods while also serving as a receptor of the by-products of large-scale agriculture and industry. It is also a depository of human waste from some of India’s biggest cities. Drained for agriculture on the one hand and filled with waste and toxins on the other, the Ganga struggles to maintain the ecological integrity and self-purifying capacities for which it has been revered for centuries (Alley 2000, 2002; Chapman and Thompson 1995).

While much of the attention given to the Ganga’s plight has focused on the urban uses of its waters, a growing area of concern and commentary is the visible change in the quality and quantity of its flow in the Himalaya (particularly on a stretch known to some as the Bhagirathi or the Bhagirathi Ganga). It is along this tributary, which residents refer to simply as Ganga, that a series of three high-altitude diversion dams were under construction in the first decade of the twenty-first century. If those dams were completed, nearly the entire stretch of the Ganga from the glaciers to the Bay of Bengal would have been subject to human manipulation. Such feats of engineering are part of the geopolitics in which hydroelectric projects find their value.

## THE GEOPOLITICS OF HIMALAYAN DAMS

India has the third-highest number of dams in the world behind China and the United States, according to the International Commission on Large Dams (ICOLD 2014). In 2012, the country’s gross hydropower potential was 148,700 units of energy, known as megawatts, of installed capacity (ICOLD 2014). Although sizable, especially since one megawatt can power the equivalent of four hundred

to nine hundred high-energy use households in the United States, the number is only an indicator of possible hydropower generation (Pandit and Grumbine 2012, 1062). Of the 188 dams capable of generating more than twenty-five megawatts, these accounted for 40,799 megawatts of actual generated electricity in 2014, as per the Central Electricity Authority Ministry of Power (CEA 2014b). The year before, in 2013, India's hydropower from dams above twenty-five megawatts accounted for 18 percent of the country's electricity generating capacity. The remaining capacity was sourced 58 percent from coal/lignite, 12 percent from renewable energy sources (wind, biopower, solar power, and hydro below twenty-five megawatts), 9 percent from gas, 2 percent from nuclear, and 1 percent from diesel (2014a, 18).

There are indications that India's hydropower generation capacity came at a cost. The total number of people displaced by dams in India since independence is between 21 and 55 million people, though the actual numbers are difficult to determine (see also Leslie 2005, 24). This is a fraction of the estimated 350 million displaced through various development projects over the last decades of the twentieth century (*ibid.*). Calling these people "ecological refugees," Leslie writes that they have been pushed out of countryside homes by dams, mines, and deforestation; thus, many of them "now live on the urban margins" as day laborers, hawkers, and beggars (*ibid.*). Supporting the claim that people displaced by dams struggle in their new contexts, Kedia's (2009) study of those relocated after the Tehri dam was built shows that many people experienced a deterioration of physical, psychological, and social well-being.

The impulse to build dams stems from a long-term preference for hydroelectric power that predates their framing as a "green" renewable technology. In the years following 1947, after India gained independence from the British, dams were predominantly viewed as a nation-building technology that could increase the irrigation potential, food productivity, energy generation, and industry that was needed to help India become a prominent player in global economic and political arenas. The goal of becoming an "industrialized" nation was set within a broader geopolitical context of resource demands and security needs. India wanted to bolster its energy independence, infrastructure, and technological capacities to ensure it would never again be subject to foreign rule. In the 1950s and 1960s there were additional concerns about capacity building to defend against fears of encroachment by the Chinese onto Indian territory. These varied factors helped propel dam construction across the country. During the period of rapid hydroelectric expansion in the latter half of the twentieth century, there was



little recourse for opposition campaigns to deter the nation's dam-building focus, though some projects were delayed or stalled because of civil society opposition and social movement campaigns. A small number of projects on tribal lands were even successfully stopped in the northeast, though these were exceptional cases reflecting struggles over indigenous rights (Arora 2009; Gergan 2014).

Despite the drawbacks and the changing geopolitical context, dams continue to feature in government plans to expand electricity generation capacity. This is evidenced by the 2008 declaration by the government of India that it would construct 292 dams in order to double India's existing capacity to generate hydroelectricity and reduce an energy shortfall of some 30,000 megawatts (Government of India 2008; Mittal 2008; Pandit and Grumbine 2012). Many of these dams are set for construction in Himalayan zones. The 2008 plan was so ambitious that some predicted that nearly 90 percent of Indian Himalayan valleys and 27 percent of densely forested areas would be affected (Pandit and Grumbine 2012).

Although the numbers for hydroelectric capacity are high, they do not necessarily reflect realistic amounts of hydroelectricity production. A 2008 study by the South Asian Network on Dams, Rivers, and People (SANDRP) draws from Indian government data to show that 89 percent of large dams in India did not meet expected outputs and that 49 percent generated less than half of their energy targets. Using Central Electricity Authority data for 2010–2011, SANDRP showed in 2012 that hydroelectricity generation in the Ganga River basin dropped by 23 percent from the highest rates noted in 1991–1992 (2012). The numbers were worrisome and require government analysis, the SANDRP report asserted, as the falling generation cannot be attributed to lower monsoon rainfall, since the precipitation numbers were average or above average in most of the years under consideration (*ibid.*). In their wording, this means that many of the planned projects are “UNVIABLE” (original capitalization, *ibid.*). Considering the diminishing returns from existing hydropower capacity, SANDRP suggested that the priority should be to optimize generation from existing projects instead of pushing large hydroelectric projects without comprehensive impact assessments and public consent.<sup>2</sup>

There are many potential reasons why Himalayan hydroelectric projects are not on target to generate the energy anticipated. To begin, many of the project evaluations are based on cut-and-paste consulting work that can tend to overestimate the projected benefits of dam building while underestimating yearly water-flow variation. Environmental impact assessments are equally flawed,

according to interlocutors who do project monitoring, and the negative ecological repercussions of dam construction and operation are regularly downplayed. Also, many of the projections for energy generation do not consider catchment degradation due to upstream projects, high rates of sedimentation leading to the damage of machinery, and the diminished returns of projects receiving inadequate repair and maintenance.

That targets are unmet indicates that large-scale hydroelectric development may be a short-term and inefficient solution in the Himalaya. This concern amplifies when one considers that climate change predications suggest that warming trends will hit the region hard. Many of the Himalayan glaciers are already showing advanced signs of retreat, although it bears noting that future rates of decline will vary considerably across the region's heterogeneous topography (Naithani et al. 2001; Rees and Collins 2006; United Nations Environment Program 2009). Although the health of the Himalayan glaciers is concerning, it is too early to say if or when they will ever "disappear," a claim that the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) was widely criticized for making in its 2007 report (Cruz et al. 2007). In addition to the ecological impacts, the loss of such important ice masses will affect people living nearby who inhabit physical water-dependent locations as well as "cultural landscapes" that include glaciers (Orlove et al. 2008).

As the glaciers melt, it is likely that the energy production targets of existing and new dams will be unrealized. In the short term, high runoff may bring large quantities of corrosive, turbine-damaging glacial silt. In the long term, parts of the Himalaya will experience below-average flows in the dry season (Dharmadhikary 2008, 25). And if the experience of flash floods from 2010 to 2015 is any indication, the Himalaya will likely suffer a number of cloudbursts and floods capable of destroying dam infrastructures and endangering lives.

The concerns about viability are linked with questions about the environmental impact of Himalayan dams. Numerous activists and scholars show how damaging dams can be to the Himalayan landscape, to biodiversity, and to the livelihoods of the people living nearby and downstream.<sup>3</sup> Despite being positioned in lists of "renewable energy" options, both reservoir dams and diversion dams can have negative impacts on climate change mitigation efforts. Reservoir catchments, such as at Uttarakhand's Tehri Dam, produce large amounts of methane (one of the most potent greenhouse gases), and the mitigation of methane is a vital part of any attempt to reduce the effects of anthropogenic climate change (Lima et al. 2008).

What also dismays the critics of dam construction is that there are options to increase energy efficiency that could be more cost effective and environmentally sound. Some argue, for instance, that power transmission in India is wasteful and that focusing on energy efficiency should be a priority. In what is a conservative calculation compared to other sources, the World Bank (2011) states that the rate of electricity transmission loss in India was at 21 percent in 2011. This is a higher number than that of other neighboring countries: the transmission loss rate sat at 10 percent in Bangladesh, 6 percent in China, 17 percent in Pakistan, and 12 percent in Sri Lanka. At 34 percent, Nepal is the only country in South Asia with higher transmission losses than India. These numbers show that it would be prudent to improve power transfers before embarking on costly new projects.

The prevalence of hydroelectric dams reflects a type of myopia around resource management and the “consolidation of water’s identity” in societies subscribing to certain ideas of technological advancement, economic development, and the centralization of state power (Linton 2010, 10). In other words, dams are productive of cultural framings on water that emphasize its material importance. Reflecting on this, Linton asserts that dams and the narrow meanings of water they produce get caught within a web of social and hydrological relations that can impose a kind of inertia on the water in question. This, he believes, provides an example of the “hegemony of water.” He explains: “Such ways of imagining, representing, and materializing water might be considered hegemonic when alternative kinds of water are made out to be less real or less legitimate, or when they become so overshadowed that they are made invisible” (ibid., 11).

## DAM BUILDING ON THE BHAGIRATHI GANGA

Rivers such as the Ganga are an especially large source of untapped hydroelectric production. As of 2014, only 4,987 megawatts of hydropower were generated along the Ganga as compared to a potential of 20,711 megawatts (CEA 2014c). This means that 67 percent of hydropower potential along the Ganga is yet to be harnessed (ibid.). To tap into this capacity, a total of 53 projects were approved for construction on the Bhagirathi Ganga and Alaknanda River and up to 200 more projects were being planned before the summer of 2010. If constructed, the veritable cascade of projects would obstruct river flow every 5–7 kilometers

(3–5 miles) and would impact locations with unstable embankments subject to periodic flooding.

Along the first 135 kilometers (84 miles) of the Bhagirathi Ganga, construction activities were initiated on two of the three approved projects that are located along the road leading up to the Gangotri temple. These entailed phase I and II of the Bhairon Ghati, the Pala Maneri project, and the Loharinag Pala project; the dams are capable of respectively generating 380, 480, and 600 megawatts. The Loharinag Pala and Pala Maneri projects were being built as early as 2006, whereas the Bhairon Ghati project was indefinitely stalled at the conceptual and planning phase. The National Thermal Power Corporation (NTPC), India's largest state-owned electric utilities company, was responsible for building the dams with support from smaller companies and material suppliers. As one might infer from their name, NTPC's long-standing expertise related to the generation of electricity from combustibles, such as coal and gas. The dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga were part of the company's effort to expand into renewables, such as hydroelectric energy. The agreement between the state and the central government was that the government would give 12 percent of the electricity generated by the dams back to Uttarakhand State at no cost.

The expansion of hydroelectric development was a source of concern for many of the residents living in the project areas. Despite the promises of expanded employment in a region with little industrial activity, people pointed out that dam building is inherently short lived and it would be preferable to have more long-term economic opportunities in the mountains. They further charged that taking water out of the riverbed through a virtual cascade of tunnels would hinder groundwater recharge, withhold water needed to support biodiversity, and potentially alter the river's ability to maintain a self-cleansing rate that is nearly three times as fast as other sacred Indian rivers such as the Yamuna (Down to Earth 2008, 31). The critiques were peppered with a sense of disillusionment over the entrenched power struggles that can define contemporary dam-building conflicts. As Mittal wrote in a scathing essay: "What is happening in the Bhagirathi valley represents a dangerous mindset sweeping the country: the emphasis of national over local, the glorification of the word 'development' regardless of what it means on the ground, the shift of scarce resources from communities to corporations, the myth that money can compensate sacrifices made by those at the lowest end of the totem pole, one-dimensional definitions of cost, and the idea that benefits will last forever" (2008, n.p.).

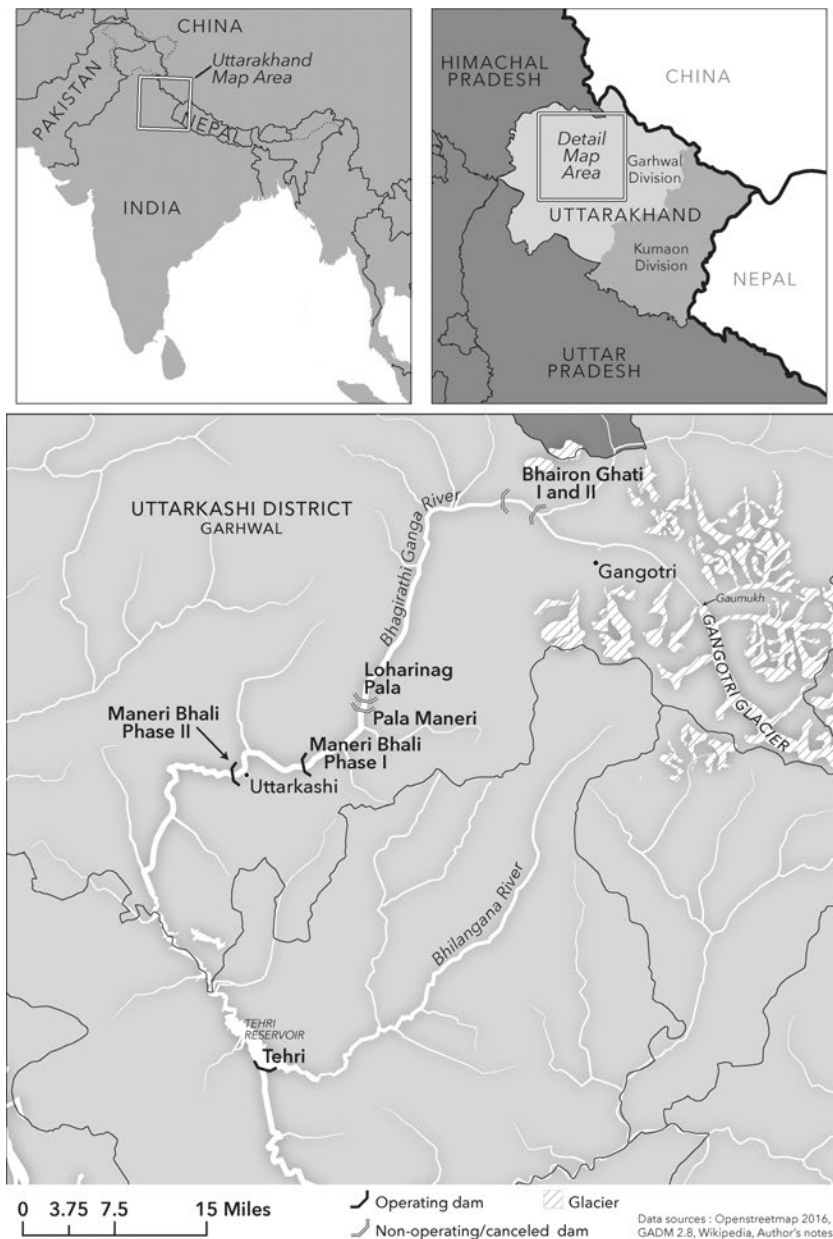


FIGURE 4. Map of Bhagirathi Ganga River; Image Used with Permission by Tim Stallmann

These concerns are part of the cultural politics in which the meanings associated with dam building in contemporary India are contested. The critique provided by journalists such as Mittal centers on the ideological battles and struggles to redefine development practices in ways that are not used to subjugate others. What writers from urban centers are less apt to pick up on are the various mountain-based cultural and religious meanings of the Ganga that come into play and can shape and define the nature of the contestations. Understandings of the Ganga's significance in Uttarkashi, the town closest to the contested dams, further contextualize diverse ways of knowing the river and interpreting the project of development.<sup>4</sup>

## KNOWING THE GANGA: PLACE-BASED ACCOUNTS FROM UTTARKASHI DISTRICT

The battle over dams in the Ganga's Himalayan areas would not be nearly as fraught if it were not for the river's sociocultural significance. The Ganga's cultural and religious resonances extend far back into India's history, perhaps even millennia, illustrated in epics such as the *Ramayana* (see Sattar 1996) and the *Mahabharata* (see Narasimhan 1998). Although numerous rivers are worshiped across South Asia, the Ganga is an especially prominent icon of human devotion to nature. Many millions of people gather along its banks every year to ritually bathe in its spiritually purifying waters that are believed to remove sin (*paap*) and the bad karma of past lives. Some of these practices are prescribed acts that take place at special times in the Hindu calendar or on momentous days, such as the event of a wedding, the birth of a child, or the death of a loved one. These latter examples are the rites of passage (*sanskara*) that, in the Hindu faith, should be celebrated with the Ganga's purifying grace. In addition to these rites, many other acts of reverence are conducted daily through informal, impromptu visits to the river's banks at locations that span the length of its flow.

For many Hindus, the specific location where one accesses the Ganga's flowing waters is significant. At most times of the year, the point where one chooses to connect with the Ganga is largely determined by proximity. On auspicious days, or to receive the blessing for specific desires, devotees may be more discerning. On the *kumbh mela* (which takes place every three years), or in the event of the *maha* or "great" *kumbh mela* (which occurs every twelve years), Hindus gather by the millions at very specific locations known as *tirth* (or *tirtha*; see S. Gupta 2001;



FIGURE 5. Image of Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand

Maclean 2008). These are sacred sites in Hindu cosmology where it is believed that the merits of the Ganga's blessings are exponentially enhanced. Every tirth has a story, and the narratives that substantiate their importance shape notions of a Hindu religious cartography.

Uttarkashi, the capital of Uttarkashi District in the Garhwal Himalaya, is one such significant place in Hindu cosmology. As with other locations, it is part of a constellation of ecological and social relations that are dynamic, ever changing, and mutually influencing (Conway 2004; Massey 1994; Raffles 1999). Like other places on a map, Uttarkashi is part of a spatial network that connects the "local" to the "national" and beyond. Since the Ganga flows through Uttarkashi, and since the location is celebrated in ancient Hindu texts, the district capital is revered as a sacred site for religious pilgrimage.

One of Uttarkashi's biggest claims to notoriety is the fact that it is considered one of three main "kashi" or abodes of Lord Shiva. *Uttar* means "upper" in Sanskrit and Hindi, so the city's name translates to "upper abode."<sup>5</sup> The *Skand Puran* (Nautiyal 1994), one of the many texts of the Puranas, elaborates at length on the importance of the northern kashi. The prose of the *Skand Puran* emphasizes



Uttarkashi's significance as a tirth in which many Hindu gods reside; it also details numerous stories of conflict between gods fighting for power in the region, and it presents Shiva (one of the three main male deities in contemporary Hindu faith) as the city's primary victor and guardian. There is also mention of the great human saints who gained boons for their extensive penance in what was once a lightly populated location ideal for solitary practices of meditation.

Uttarkashi's relative isolation from the centers of power meant that change was slow until the 1970s, even as life continued to urbanize in the Indian plains. Before the relatively recent creation of car-accessible roads to the region, what is currently the bustling town of Uttarkashi was once simply referred to as the "big market" or *bara haat* (Mehra 2007). This was the site where people would gather from all over the district to trade goods with regional and Tibetan merchants and to buy provisions that could not be made in the villages. According to older residents, salt and tobacco were the most important items that people had to procure; they could produce the rest of their daily needs on their own. In the early twenty-first century, times of scarcity are but a memory for those living in the district capital, a location of increasing economic activity with a growing population that is sprawling across adjacent agricultural lands.

When residents reflect on Uttarkashi's past and its numerous valences, the town's importance is constantly set in contrast with that of the "lower" kashi of Varanasi in the Indian plains. These two kashi bear many resemblances: Like it does in Varanasi, the Ganga flows through Uttarkashi in the shape of a sickle. Both locations also have similar landmarks. In Varanasi, many *ghat* (steps leading to places of worship) line the banks of the Ganga. The first and last of these ghat, Varuna and Assi, help constitute the city's famous name. Uttarkashi, by contrast, is demarcated by the inflow of tributaries that are similarly known as Varuna and Assi. These spatial and linguistic similarities link the two sites.

Whereas Varanasi has been the center of Hindu worship to Shiva and the Ganga for millennia (Eck 1982; Mahajan 2004; R. Singh 1993; Varady 1989), fewer people know the significance of Uttarkashi. As the *Skand Puran* predicted, however, Uttarkashi is becoming a prominent location for Hindu pilgrimage. A popular legend that one hears in Uttarkashi is that, as the current age of degeneration progresses in the epoch of *Kali yug* (one of four cycles of time in Hindu cosmology and the one we are currently experiencing), Shiva will shift his primary residence from Varanasi to Uttarkashi. This will make Uttarkashi among the most important locations along the Ganga. A tourist pamphlet relates this claim while adding that the Ganga's flow through the city will help maintain



and correct the moral balance of the universe as it has purportedly done several times before (Andurai Utsav Uttarkashi 2006).<sup>6</sup>

Despite praise for Uttarkashi's unique qualities and the significance of the Ganga's flow through the town, tourists and pilgrims are repeatedly surprised when they arrive after their arduous bus journeys up long, winding, and (at times) dilapidated roads to find that this important site on the Ganga has been extensively manipulated by dam building. In 2006, the second phase of the Maneri Bhali dam was completed near the center of town, creating a small reservoir that blocks the river's flow for a short stretch. Although this did not pose a significant problem to rites of worship upstream where the river still flows freely (at points such as Manikarnika ghat), the presence of a small dam in the middle of a tirth can be unsettling for some visitors. Since the destination of most pilgrims is the auspicious Gangotri temple near the Gaumukh glacier, this was once easy to overlook; visitors would be treated to a stunning forested landscape lightly populated by villages once they left Uttarkashi. Following the period of dam construction, however, the upstream regions were subjected to significant manipulation and destruction. Some residents worried about the resulting aesthetic and environmental damage and its potential impacts on cultural and religious tourism; in fact, this was enough of a concern that hoteliers complained repeatedly to local officials. As the secretary of the Uttarkashi Hotel Association once told me, the official stance was "double-minded": To outsiders, he said, they promote Uttarkashi as a center for religious worship; to residents, they promote it as a location with vast development potential. He added: "So what is it, then? Do they want tourism here or do they want development? Because they can't have it both ways."

## **GANGA AND THE SIGNIFICANCE OF GARHWAL'S DEV BHOOMI**

Uttarkashi's importance—and by extension the significance of the Ganga that flows through the town—is enhanced by its location within Garhwal, a region with a rich history. For many centuries before independence, Garhwal maintained cultural and political institutions that varied from those of the plains (Kharkwal 1993). Since the area was protected by the rugged terrain of the Siwalik hills to the south, it was not susceptible to the Mughal invasions that swept across the Indian plains in the first half of the second millennium CE. Within Garhwal,

however, there were battles for dominance among numerous small principalities that maintained modest fortresses (*gadhi*); in fact, Garhwal is named after these landmarks, and it translates to “land of forts” (Sax 2002, 41). In 1804, however, Garhwal fell to the rule of Nepal’s Gurkha forces. The Gurkha reign was short lived but violent; it lasted only until 1815, yet memories of rape, torture, and mass killings loom large even in the contemporary era. The fall of the Gurkhas coincided with the end of the Anglo-Gurkha war and the formation of a treaty in which the British annexed Garhwal and the neighboring ethnolinguistic region of Kumaon.<sup>7</sup>

For many Indians, Garhwal is a land of gods known as *dev bhoomi*. Whereas *dev* translates to “god,” the word *bhoomi* is evocative of a landscape. Thus, *dev bhoomi* is a sacred landscape in which numerous divine entities reside. Explaining the first term, *dev*, Gulia writes, “The word *devata* is derived from the Sanskrit root *div* (“to shine”) and indeed, the glint of these Himalayan peaks has for centuries exercised a powerful hold on the Indian imagination” (2007, 231–32). The many shrines and temples that one finds dotted across the mountain landscape add to these spiritual framings. Some of the temples house well-known gods and goddesses in the Hindu pantheon (which purportedly, or figuratively, has 330 million deities). A number of the temples host regional goddesses (*devi*) and gods (*devta*). Some of these entities are associated with stories—some might call them folklore—about people and spirits who lived in the region and became powerful deities.<sup>8</sup> There are also a number of practices and rites enacted in Garhwal that may have been influenced by the famed characters of the *Mahabharata* (Gulia 2007; Sax 2002). Garhwalis believe that Arjuna, one of the Pandava brothers of the *Mahabharata*, got his powers as an archer by worshiping Shiva. In the aftermath of the fratricidal war in which the epic culminates, the Pandavas are said to have fled to Garhwal in search of solitude and salvation (Narasimhan 1998).

Archaeological excavations testify to the antiquity of civilization in Garhwal. The material remains are used to validate stories about the spiritual ascetics and iconic figures that are believed to have spent time communing with the gods in the Himalaya and undergoing penance for the benefit of humankind.<sup>9</sup> Even in the contemporary period, the region is replete with temples that portend to be the “one and only” sacred site in *Mahabharata* lore where the Pandavas escaped a wax house that their enemies intended to set alight. One such temple was a stone’s throw from my living quarters in a small village outside of Uttarkashi, and it was a location where I got to see numerous enactments of the Pandav Lila, a rite that performs stories about the Pandav brothers while the players, possessed by



FIGURE 6. The Palanquin of a Devta in a Garhwali Village

divine forces, dance exuberantly. Just as the religious significance of Uttarkashi situates residents in a constellation of Hindu tirth, the performance of the Pandav Lila connects people to wider Hindu lineages and mythologies about the important figures that have lived or traveled through the region.

For Garhwalis, the Ganga is one of the most important entities in their land of gods and goddesses and is often considered to be the main attraction for those visiting the region. The river's worth and significance is told in numerous ways. The most famous story is of the Ganga's fall to earth in riverine form at the behest of a mortal by the name of Bhagirath. This is the story to which Dr. G. D. Agarwal (in the introduction) and Sarita (in the interlude) referred when speaking of the penance required to bring Ganga into the material realm.

As told in epics such as the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, as well as in many other renderings (Darian 1978), the Ganga was asked to leave the heavens, where she lived as a celestial being, and enter the world to purify the ashes of King Sagara's sixty thousand sons. These sons were cursed after they brazenly woke a sage from his meditative trance, mistaking him for having hindered a ceremony that marked the King's reign. Angered, he instantly turned them into

ashes, and without proper burial rites, the sons were left in a sort of limbo that only the Ganga's grace could amend.

King Sagara's only surviving son could not save these forlorn souls by earning the Ganga's favor, but his great-grandson, Bhagirath, underwent hundreds of years of meditation and fasting at what is today known as Gangotri to win liberation for his ancestors. The gods were impressed with Bhagirath's penance, and they agreed to let the Ganga fall from the heavens. The goddess Ganga was resistant at first, saying she would destroy the earth with the power of her descent in riverine form, so Bhagirath pleaded to Lord Shiva for help. Eventually, after seeing the devout mortal undertake even more years of meditation and prayer, Shiva came up with a solution: he agreed to let the Ganga's material manifestation fall into his matted locks, which he promised would absorb the river's force. Unfortunately for Bhagirath, Shiva liked the feel of Ganga flowing over his head so much that for some time he forgot to let her continue on her course. After more pleading, Shiva finally let her waters reach the ground. Ganga then followed King Bhagirath on a path down the mountains and then southeast to the Bay of Bengal where the goddess absorbed the remains of his sixty thousand ancestors and gave them salvation.

The story of King Bhagirath might seem like a metaphor for the grace that the Ganga's waters provide for the thirsty regions of North India. For residents living along the primary stretch of the Ganga in the Himalaya, however, the river's journey to earth at the bequest of King Bhagirath is no tall tale; they insist that this story recounts true events. This story surfaced repeatedly during my fieldwork. It was often invoked, for instance, at meetings, assemblies, and rallies that opposed dam building. In these spaces (which are explored in detail in chapter 2), women sang songs celebrating both the river's significance in the sacred geography of the Himalaya and the role that Bhagirath played in ensuring humanity could avail of the Ganga's blessings.

Many speeches in opposition to dam building restated the river's connection with King Bhagirath. Nirmala, an outspoken defender of the Ganga whose actions I soon highlight, would frequently raise a question when dam proponents spoke of the development, or *vikaas*, that the dams would bring. To their emphasis on the need for development, she would retort, "If the engineers and the dam builders are so great, why don't they bring another Ganga down to earth like Bhagirath did?" If they could do that, she assured them, she and others would have no opposition to dam building on the newly created river. This comment was usually met with laughter. But Nirmala often achieved her point with

the absurdity of the suggestion; she underscored the cosmological significance of the Bhagirathi Ganga by pointing out its uniqueness among rivers. Whereas other rivers might flow because of hydraulic systems and topographic influences, the Ganga exists because of human intervention.

This perspective parallels the way that Escobar (1999) describes the anthropogenic influence on all natural resources and systems in the current epoch of “second nature.” His arguments challenge the idea that there is somehow an untouched nature somewhere in the world whose “pristine” state is marked by isolation from the rest of human activities. The difference, however, is that people not only recognize that humans have influenced the Ganga but also they believe that a human (King Bhagirath, through his penance) helped to create its form and bring about its presence on the earth. Rather than conceptualizing the river as “nature” (i.e., a naturally occurring entity that exists within an ecological terrain of interconnected resources), Ganga devotees believe that the river was brought to earth through an agreement *between gods and humans*. From this perspective, the Ganga is inextricably intertwined with culture and can *never* be reduced to the status of a mere river. When offering the story of King Bhagirath, therefore, people argue that current generations should not destroy an entity that is unique in the world.

## DEVELOPMENT ON THE GANGA: RIVER DEVOTEE PERSPECTIVES

Given the sociocultural values attributed to the landscape through which the Bhagirathi Ganga flows, many questioned the logic of harnessing the river’s last stretch of undisrupted flow. This did not necessarily mean that they were against hydroelectric generation or even acts of development. In fact, despite their criticism of dam projects on the main river, such interlocutors often drew attention to the hydroelectric potential of nearby tributaries and suggested building small dams on these sources. As one woman said, “We aren’t against dams. We are against stopping the Ganga’s flow. It should be constant.” Numerous others repeated this statement and stressed that it is only when the Ganga’s flow is constant and uninterrupted (*aviral*) that it remains holy (*pavitra*). This is because, from *some* Hindu religious perspectives, only running water is imbued with the divine life force of the goddess. Whereas notions of place helped formulate claims about the special qualities of the upper stretches of the Bhagirathi

Ganga, notions of flow enabled river devotees to make claims about the importance of allowing it to remain untethered. As a matter of fact, the importance of the Ganga's aviral status was key in the opposition demands; social movement participants made this clear in the slogans they shouted at rallies and protests. In most rallies, it was common to hear a demand for the river's free flow when participants cried loudly, "Let the Ganga flow free! Let the Ganga remain pure!"<sup>10</sup>

Reverence for the river's continual flow is historically grounded. As Diana Eck (1996) reminds us, the poets and seers of bygone eras often praised the blessings and purifying energies of the "goddess waters." One of the more famous poems is the "Ganga Lahiri" written by Jagannatha in the seventeenth century. His composition emphasizes the relationship between the moving waters and the grace that the river bestows. Contemplating this and other writings, Eck explains:

It is particularly the life, the movement, the activity of the waters of the Ganga that has attracted poets and devotees through the ages. Hers are not the motionless waters of the precreation seas, but running, energetic waters of life. The traditional etymology of Ganga derives the name from the verb *gam*, 'to go' . . . Her hymns constantly emphasize the running, flowing, energetic movement of her waters, and they do so at times with elaborate alliteration and onomatopoeia. (Eck 1996, 143–44)

As Eck additionally notes, there is a pervasive notion that the Ganga needs to be flowing to destroy the earthly sins of her devotees. "It is running water that is the chief agent of purification in the complex Hindu scheme of purity and pollution," she writes. "Water absorbs pollution, but when it is running, it carries pollution away as well" (ibid., 144). These were points that dam opponents also made; in conversations and interviews, people repeatedly stated that the dams would redirect the river through tunnels and leave insufficient flow in the riverbed. Some imagined that this would hinder the goddess's ability to bless and purify devotees.

Many dam opponents emphasized that the significance of accessing the Ganga's uninterrupted flow was something that even the British were forced to respect during their rule in India. Downstream from the Himalaya, where the Ganga enters the plains, Indians protested British plans to obstruct and redirect waters that flowed by a holy Hindu bathing place on Har Ki Pauri ghat in Haridwar. In 1916, an agreement was reached to maintain a constant flow past

the sacred ghat (Alley 2002; Drew 2014b). This, as some interpreted it, equaled “a mandate that the Ganga be allowed to flow unfettered” (Bhagirathi Bachao Sankalp 2008). As a long-time village leader commented to me when considering this history, it was ironic that the current government would not listen to its own citizens’ pleas on an issue to which the British made concessions. In a very forceful description, he criticized the Indian government’s efforts to follow the dam-building sprees happening around the world, calling it an effort to “ape the West.”

The seeming government apathy was unsettling in a situation where the river faced not one but several projects that would have redirected the water out of the riverbed for long stretches. Some feared this would equate to the river’s virtual disappearance.

Today the very existence of the Ganga is threatened by multiple barrages and Hydro-electric projects planned along its Himalayan stretch—the Bhagirathi. First the Tehri Dam and Maneri Bhali were built. Next a series of dams are being built between the Gangotri glacier and Uttarkashi. At these sites water shall be stored, then released periodically through tunnels . . . The same is repeated again (and again) further downstream. The result will be that in long stretches and over [a] considerable period of time, there shall be no flow in the channel. **THE GANGA WOULD RUN DRY** [original emphasis]. (Bhagirathi Bachao Sankalp 2008, 1)

The reason that the government persisted in such a scheme, of course, was to promote development. When I asked people in Uttarkashi about this rationale, some would counter the narrow definition of development that was being posited. Sure, they commented, dam building enhances infrastructure in the Himalaya and adds to the nation’s energy supplies. But dams also cause ecological destruction, and they have consequences for cultural and religious practices, including the regionally specific rites of worship. In July 2009, a schoolteacher in the city of Uttarkashi spoke to these concerns after first stating the pro-development stance:

The people who are industrialists and bureaucrats, they all feel that power is important for us . . . for development . . . They are not ready to listen to this—they consider this a very silly argument: Where will we take a bath and where will we take the dholi [the devta’s carriage] and all of that? They don’t consider it important . . . the power is going to go all the way down to Trivandrum [South India]



and so many other places . . . So they feel that, just for the local requirements of the devta having a bath and the beliefs of some people, we can't forgo the national cause. That is what they feel. But the people, I think, have their own local rights over the river. They have rights. I think one day they should take some shovels and go to these bloody dams.

The schoolteacher's response adamantly defended people's rights to access a free-flowing Ganga in Uttarkashi District. He and many others also pointed to the precedence of dam decommissioning taking place in the world to save endangered fish and their habitats. "We are ready to do so much for the animal kingdom," the schoolteacher pointed out, "but who will hear the human cry, the cry of the people?"

A female dam opponent and Ganga Ahvaan member voiced similar criticisms of the narrow development ideologies being promoted. In an exchange that took place near the beginning of the movement in 2007, she talked about the collective efforts underway to challenge the dominant framework. Summarizing her personal stance, she said, "You cannot define the development of a society or a person by the amount of electricity that you can consume or something ridiculous like that." Development, in her opinion, needs to be qualified by a range of social, cultural, religious, and technological indicators rather than by the proliferation of infrastructure projects.

After reminding me of the destructive nature of dam building in the Himalaya, the minimal number of jobs created, and the potential loss of the vital tourism that fuels much of the regional economy,<sup>11</sup> she focused on the nonmaterial costs of the projects: "At any rate, this whole valley is the Ganga valley . . . What is the importance of this valley without the Ganga?" Indeed, because of the Ganga's regional significance, she claimed that the very identity of the region was at stake. The development rhetoric, she countered, was "just a sham" to influence villagers and Uttarkashi residents, and to discourage them from protesting.

I explore the relationship between the Ganga and the identity in the next chapter on human affect for the river. But what is most important to note again is the way that objections to dominant development framings reify the importance of preserving the integrity of Garhwal's sacred landscape alongside the continuity of the Ganga's flow. These arguments are mounted in a defense of the cultural worlds that uphold the sanctity and importance of the meaningful locations and entities in the Himalaya that constitute a web of human and other-than-human relations.



## DAILY PRACTICE ALONG THE GANGA IN UTTARKASHI

To better understand why large dams on the Ganga would upset people, such as the women living along its flow in the mountains, it is necessary to appreciate the river's role in daily practice and everyday life. While these moments of encounter are shaped by notions of the Ganga's significance in various Hindu texts and religious teachings, they are also phenomenological points of connection that regularly verify the goddess's powers and her blessings to devotees. These ways of experiencing the Ganga differ from those of people who do not live along the river, including those in metropolises such as New Delhi, and who connect to the river on an irregular basis or only on astrologically and cosmologically significant days.<sup>12</sup>

In places such as Uttarkashi, rites and prayers occur along the river's banks at most hours of the day, but they are especially prominent in the mornings and the evenings. The Brahmin (high caste) priests have standardized sacred chants (mantra) that they recite in Sanskrit at evening ceremonies, such as the Ganga aarati. Those with a fair degree of education often also offer chants, such as the Gayatri mantra, when ritually bathing in the river. Many others—and women in particular—approach the river with less formalized prayer that is not necessarily prescribed by religious authorities. Such people merely speak what is in their hearts while asking for guidance and blessings.

The realization of this distinction emerged in a mutually embarrassing way while I was conversing with some of my female interlocutors. When I began my fieldwork (at a time when I was still ignorant of the full implications of the educational disparities among the genders), I would ask women I saw praying at the river's banks what mantra they said to the Ganga when approaching her waters with hands folded in respect. Many faces flushed at this question, and the answer, more often than not, was that the person in question did not say a specific mantra since she was not well versed in religious texts. If she did say something, it was perhaps *om namah shivayah* (an invocation to Lord Shiva that is common among his devotees). The use of mantra was not, in fact, seen as vital since the river is *ma*, a mother who knows what is on her children's minds and who has insight that supersedes the use of raw or eloquent language.

These comments point toward the intimacy of the relationships that people have with the Ganga. The people in Uttarkashi who told me about their daily

routines would often say that, upon waking, the first thing they do is join their palms in reverence to the Ganga while bowing and saying a quick tribute to the goddess in Hindi. This could be as simple a comment as “glory to mother Ganga” (*ganga maaya ki jae*). Many Uttarkashi residents, and the women in particular, would even begin their days by physically interacting with the Ganga. They would either ceremonially wash their hands, face, and feet or they would immerse themselves in a full-body dip. In these early morning practices, people released their fears and worries by offering them to Ganga and to Shiva, with whom the river’s flow is intertwined. As one woman put it when asked about her morning practice: “I ask God to take care of my family, to give us peace.” She went on to say that her hope is that God will make her strong. “There are a lot of worries,” she continued, “there are a lot of family problems. I do it [visit the Ganga] to ask for wisdom, to get wisdom. [I do it] to ask for my family’s protection . . . that is why.”

For such respondents, the practice of interacting with the Ganga is soothing, comforting, and uplifting. One river devotee described the experience of bathing in the Ganga by saying that it makes the body feel light. “It feels like entering a new perception, a new consciousness . . . like one has joined with God. It is a joyful experience.” The man added that the Ganga’s waters are healing. Equating them with medicine, he shared that bathing in the river takes away the chronic back pain he incurred after a near-death experience when a bus on which he was traveling fell into a ravine along the Ganga. He was miraculously ejected from the vehicle even though he was sitting in the back, away from the door. He and a few others landed on the mountainside while most the passengers drowned inside the bus once it was submerged. The man credited the goddess Ganga with saving him, and with providing for the healing he receives daily when bathing in her waters.

Although some might understate these place-based practices of ritual and devotion on the river as prescriptive behavior or habit, such a stance overlooks the ways that interactions with the “environment” are related to its perception (Ingold 2000, 9). Put another way, people’s actions must be viewed within the cultural worlds that uphold the Ganga’s importance as a divine entity imbued with purifying grace. In addition to sociocultural framings that help people understand the Ganga’s importance, the need to be in contact with the river and its goddess reflects people’s desire for cosmological balance—even if the order one seeks is tightly confined to well-being in personal and familial spheres. Accessing its waters is therefore about much more than religious duty or even

spirituality; contact with the water inserts one into a cosmic play in which a person can attract fortune and ward off tragedy. When one bathes at 4 a.m. in the dead of winter; takes a dip in gushing waters known to sweep away devotees; or approaches the waters in the dry summer months when one is forced to step around the filth and waste of others, these actions represent an intention to win favor in a world where righteous action (*dharma*) is the ultimate guide. The Ganga, in other words, helps people navigate the uncertainties of life. That said, many people feel that to win the goddess's favor, a degree of effort must be shown to prove the power of one's faith. And without the river's constant flow through the Garhwal mountains, some devotees worried that they would be deprived of both the ability to demonstrate their devotion (*bhakt*) to a meaningful entity and a vital tool that enables their epistemological and ontological grounding in the sacred geography of the Himalaya.<sup>13</sup>

## OTHER-THAN-HUMAN ONTOLOGIES AND THE GANGA

It is important to pause and consider the challenges some of us might face when engaging with different ways of knowing the Ganga and with the claims of the other-than-human entities that exist in the world. The discussion of existential and metaphysical possibilities, which is part of the study of being known as ontology, requires an acknowledgment of the difficulty that someone from outside the Garhwal region, such as myself, might encounter in trying to access “non-Western” domains of affect and belief.<sup>14</sup> During the period of my fieldwork, I endeavored to be open to epistemological and ontological difference, but this was not always an easy task. As a United States citizen and a white woman (*gori*, a Hindi word that can be applied affectionately or derisively), I was sometimes challenged by the different ways of knowing the Ganga.

The cultural frames that posit a mother and life giver in the form of a river are not easy for non-Indians to grasp. Annie Bolitho (2008) describes the conundrum of the curious foreigner in Varanasi attempting to understand everything that the river is and does. After living along the river's banks and witnessing countless acts of worship and defilement, she asks herself, “What does it mean to say Ganga Ma—Mother Ganges?” This questioning takes her inward, to her own cultural constraints. Pondering this, she evaluates her thoughts and attitudes: “I reflected on how many people addressed me as ‘Ma’ [Mother] in India,

in respect, in hope that I would see their need, and in traditional greeting. Yet it was outside my cultural tradition, and my usual understandings and knowings, to call a river Mother” (Bolitho 2008, 400). It is one step, as Bolitho ponders, to move from calling the river “it” to using feminine pronouns (“she” or “her”); it is another altogether to conceptualize the river as a physical mother. Bolitho’s confrontations with her own socialization led her to reflect on the work of Dipesh Chakrabarty (2000), whose writings expose the fuzzy boundaries of European modernity in India and beyond.

The problem with much postcolonial scholarship, Chakrabarty argues, is that Western secular assumptions lead us to assert that “the human is ontologically singular, that gods and spirits are in the end ‘social facts’” (Chakrabarty 2000, 16). And yet, he contends, the “nonrational” (gods and spirits) have never been banished because they inevitably reappear when history confronts the “multicultural.” This merits critical reflection: If our intellectual consciousness is born solely out of “modern western rational analysis and observational procedures,” Chakrabarty contends, then we are in a predicament when it comes to speaking of practices within a “participative, lived, pre-analytic cultural experience” (2000, 402). The trouble that arises in the translation of *Ganga Ma* (also known as *Ma Ganga*) is, thus, that we may falter in our ability to convey, and to imagine, the dynamism of experience that the term conveys.

Observations of the multiple ontologies of the Ganga—the states of being and sentience of which it is capable—reflect the degree to which it is necessary to refrain from assuming what others know or feel for such a sacred entity. That said, one is confronted with the challenge that the reality of ontological difference can also be politically mobilized. Such employments mandate that we continue a project attuned to the cultural politics in which various meanings and ontologies of the Ganga are strategically deployed. It is in this spirit that I try to unpack some of the ways that certain people believe in, and connect to, the sacred river.

## **DAM PROPONENT AND ENVIRONMENTALIST PERSPECTIVES ON DEVELOPMENT**

I learned quickly what the Ganga meant to people in Uttarkashi District and the blessings that it was capable of bestowing on river devotees, based on their proximity to its continuous flow. In my orientation to the issues, these framings

quickly became commonplace and taken for granted. The ease with which I incorporated the river's location-based meanings and the goddess's powers into my framework for thinking of the Ganga was challenged, however, when I spoke with the pro-dam contingents. I struggled, in short, to diplomatically manage the comments of the people occupying the other side of the development debate. This was partly because of the rumors of corruption circulating about the bribes exchanged to foster support for hydroelectric projects.<sup>15</sup> That the pro-dam utterances were at times contradictory, pragmatic, and functionalist contributed to my suspicions.

Let me explain: Dam proponents are highly aware of the criticism that the projects receive from river devotees and dam opponents. When I met with the public-relations representative of the company building the dam, the NTPC, he promptly dismissed the concerns of villagers, Uttarkashi residents, and social movement actors who worried that the dams would impact the sanctity of the Ganga and the region. Qualifying that he, too, is a religious man who ceremonially bathes in the river, he dismissed the significance of localized change. After conceding that faith is an important issue, he said, "Listen, I am from Calcutta. There is a place there, Ganga Saagar, where the Ganga meets the sea. It is very holy. Every year, millions of people go there to bathe. Many more people go there in one day than go to Gaumukh all year." This comment was used to argue that "wherever the Ganga flows, she is holy." Since all points on the Ganga are *equally* sacred, he asserted that there were no problems in manipulating the last free-flowing stretch of the river. He declared that the Himalayan dam projects could never impact Hindu faith because there are always other locations along the river where devotees can reconnect with its flow and receive the Ganga's grace.

While there may have been merits to some of his arguments, the dam proponent ultimately offered an elitist position. Many of my rural and semi-urban interlocutors do not have the finances to visit the Ganga in a location outside of Uttarkashi District let alone in another state. For them, the most important part of the river is the nearby stretch that they access daily and that gives meaning to their lives and everyday practices.

When I reminded the dam representative of the impact that diversion dams would have on the residents who risk losing access to the Ganga's flow, he argued that these worries are minor compared to the necessity of augmenting the country's energy supplies. As for the concerns about impacting the sacred geography of the region by altering the continuous flow or *aviralta*, he deflected them as the thoughts of only a few people, most whom he believed were not

even from the mountains. In a tone that echoed the concerns that I will outline in chapter 4, he cautioned that such people come to the mountains with backing and money from NGOs or conservative religious groups. You must ask yourself, he urged, why do these people pick up on the mountain-based projects when they live near the most polluted stretches of the Ganga downstream? If they love the Ganga, why don't they do work where it is "most needed" to save the river?

The dam company representative was not alone in speculating about the motivations of the dam opponents. Although a few NGO leaders upheld the emphasis on the need to respect the faith that devotees have for the river, numerous environmentalists and institutional representatives criticized the "Hinduization" of the fight over the Ganga's high-altitude reaches. From such perspectives, the religious aspects of concern are only one of the many issues that need to be addressed. More pressing for environmentalists are the ecological and livelihood implications of dam building in sensitive areas like the Himalaya.

For people like Himanshu Thakkur of SANDRP, the emphasis on faith limits the scope of dam protests. In his view, the social and environmental impacts demand more attention. While he recognized the river's significance for Himalayan residents and the larger Hindu community, he also noted that many rivers in India are culturally and religiously important. Speaking of a river in South India, he pointed out that the Kaveri is interchangeably called "the Ganga" and it is revered as such even though the Ganga does not connect with southern waterways. This is true for other rivers, and it speaks to the pan-Indian symbolism of not just the Ganga but water itself as a divine, life-giving entity. The Ganga's transmutability demonstrates the extent to which all rivers in India are objects of reverence that demand culturally and environmentally sensitive solutions. He argued, following this logic, that it is shortsighted to delimit a section of the river's length for preservation. Thakkur and others believe that whatever is deemed good for a particular stretch of the Ganga is applicable to the management of the entire river and even other waterways.

Other environmentalists echo the sentiments that an integrated approach to managing all of India's rivers is needed. Calling herself a "secular Hindu," the renowned environmental activist Sunita Narain said of the controversy: "There is no question that the Ganga is a special river but all rivers are endangered." Noting that the religious significance of the Ganga has not prevented Hindus from throwing trash in the river, she positioned the religious concerns as one of many special interests to be considered in the river's management. When we met in her New Delhi office at the Centre for Science and Environment—a

leading institution that exposes environmental injustice and promotes responsible government policies—she asserted that the best course of action would be to focus on the management of entire water basins rather than on segments of select rivers. This would entail what she called a “cumulative impact assessment” for the many projects that line India’s rivers. Such measures would combat the shortsighted “one project at a time” emphasis in favor of addressing the management of entire river systems.

The late Dr. Ramaswamy Iyer, one of India’s most prominent experts on water resource management, would likely have agreed with the assertions of Thakkur and Narain. In a 2009 meeting in his office at the Centre for Policy Research, he cautioned that “a river is many things” when I asked him to comment on the Ganga devotee complaints against dam building in the Himalaya. Even as Indian rivers are equated with gods and goddesses, he argued, one cannot forget that they supply water needed for human prosperity and civilization. Although he conceded that sacred places such as temples should not be interfered with, he countered that activists such as G. D. Agarwal are not talking about the submergence of sacred sites. Rather, they are contesting the interruption of flow in a holy Hindu river. “Now,” cautioned Iyer, “I don’t know how far that [argument] can be pushed because all of human life is an interference with nature.” Besides, he added, “we call the Ganga sacred but we pollute it.” These comments illustrate a perspective that recognizes the significance of religious reverence for rivers but prioritizes resource use and management concerns.

For Iyer, the most prominent reasons to oppose dams along rivers like the Bhagirathi Ganga are the environmental and humanitarian ones. Water flows, once redirected to tunnels and trapped in reservoirs, further reduce the prospects for agriculture and river-dependent livelihoods such as boating and fishing. In addition to the ecological damage, biodiversity is impaired. Worse yet are the thousands of human lives that are disrupted due to displacement and resettlement. For these reasons, he cautioned, “one should be very very careful about building these huge projects.” To this, he added a disclaimer that he is not “anti-development”:

I am not saying that no dam should ever be built. I don’t take an extreme position on this; some people do. All I am saying is, “For heaven’s sake, be very careful about it. Let it not be your first choice.” What it has been so far is our first choice. We think of development (and) we want to build dams. I would say, do everything else that you can. If there are no options, or if this is the very best of all options,

then you can go in for it . . . Be mindful of the consequences. Take people into confidence, consult them. But try and avoid it if you can. This is my approach to big dams, whether (they are) on the Ganga or anywhere else.<sup>16</sup>

Noting a key point from his numerous publications, Iyer argued that the larger problem is the mentality with which such projects are enacted; they aim to meet increasing demands that can never be met (Iyer 2003, 132–135). Rather than talking about how particular projects can meet shortfalls in expected water and energy supplies, he argued, the state should focus on increasing efficiency and managing unrealistic demands.

## **RIVER DEVOTEES RESPOND TO THE “SECULAR” CRITIQUES**

Activists driven by an urge to protect Indian cultural heritage and the integrity of the Ganga are well informed of the secular and environmental critiques of their faith-based stance. While many understand the environmental issues, they choose to place emphasis on the river's divine qualities to highlight the importance of cultural, religious, and spiritual practices linked with the Ganga. When asked about the disagreements over the emphasis on religion in the dam oppositions, a main leader of the Ganga Ahvaan summarized the predicament in a November 2009 interview at the house of another activist in Uttarkashi: “They are environmentalists,” he said in a moment of rest between meetings with local officials and dam opponents. “They see everything from the perspective of the environment. We see that, too, but we go beyond that.” Sipping on the sweet milk tea that our hosts offered, he suggested that a more appropriate frame would be a “holistic humanism” that includes the long tradition of reverence for rivers, trees, and rocks that extends back to holy Hindu texts such as the Vedas. Contrasting his views with those of the secularly inclined, he reasoned that development proponents and environmentalists see a separation between nature and themselves. Holistic humanism, on the other hand, considers humans to be intimately connected to nature; in this perspective, God is recognized as residing within all living and inanimate entities.

A PhD student in nanoscience at the acclaimed Jawaharlal Nehru University at the time, the activist went on to explain the science behind his position: “What, after all, is the atom?” he prodded. “‘A’ means ‘not’ and ‘tom’ means



‘dividable.’ So the atom is that which is indivisible.” But, he added, we have divided the atom and found that it contains neutrons, protons, and other elements. Despite these feats, we know that something else is there, something that we can’t pinpoint. “That,” he pronounced, “is consciousness . . . This consciousness is everywhere—in these plastic chairs and the floor beneath us.” Within the layers of consciousness, he offered Ganga as a symbol—a famous symbol about which people all over the world know—of Indian traditions for honoring the intertwining of nature and human existence. Given the river’s paramount symbolism, he concluded that “this [river] should not be damaged; it is our cultural heritage. We can compromise on other rivers *but there is no compromise for the Ganga* [original emphasis].” Besides, he added, they can make less than one percent of the nation’s power with all the dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga. Pointing to a stack of papers in his lap, he repeated, “less than one percent—I have all the files here . . . We don’t believe that the Ganga should be sacrificed for something so little.”

Another organizer of Ganga Ahvaan summarized the feelings of some dam opponents when she exclaimed that losing the river “is a threat to our existence.” To emphasize the river’s paramount importance when we spoke in November 2009, she pointed to the presence of bottles of Ganga water, known in Hindi as *gangajal*, in homes throughout the world. Speaking on behalf of these Hindus, she declared: “We just can’t think of being without it.” The woman, who runs a successful business that tests water quality and checks compliance with environmental standards, was adamant that the cultural and religious concerns of the river’s loss cannot be understated. Speaking from her home in Jodhpur, Rajasthan—a desert state far removed from the flow of the Ganga in Uttarkashi—she lamented that the “scientists” of India are misguided if they think they can tamper with the last free-flowing stretch. “In the name of secularism,” she explained, “they are saying, ‘Oh, we don’t want to promote Hinduism’ . . . But [being] secular doesn’t mean that you go away from your roots.” After all, she reasoned, the river is something that people have worshiped throughout the ages. With passion, she beseeched the government to recognize how its development projects impact devotees:

They are playing with the sentiments of people . . . Scientists, the so-called scientists talk of development, they talk of prosperity. But what type of development is this? Where are we going to? Do they need so much electricity to light the malls in the big cities? The whole night, these malls are running. Instead of wasting so

much energy, if they just save energy and if they can manage energy properly, I think they will produce more than what these dams are going to produce. No sensible person would like to go for this type of an option . . . to sacrifice a river like Ganga . . . They are attacking right at our soul. A physical abuse is tolerable but attacking at the soul is something beyond tolerance.

The above utterances, and especially the comment that project proponents are “attacking right at our soul,” point again to the high stakes perceived in dam building along the Ganga. For my interlocutor, this is foolhardy since much of the electricity created is wasted through inefficient use in locations like the bright, air-conditioned malls that cater to the economically affluent. She argued that it is not worth sacrificing an irreplaceable entity like the Ganga for the all-night use of energy to fuel commercial hubs. Given the river’s paramount importance, she reasoned that the failure to protect the Ganga and the sentiments of its devotees is a sign of the rampant materialism that, along with corruption, has eroded social values.

## THE CULTURAL POLITICS OF KNOWING THE GANGA

The perspectives shared here point to varied ways of knowing the Ganga and the value of the locations through which it flows. The debates highlight the cultural politics in which different epistemologies of space and place are employed along with disparate evaluations of the value of Ganga’s continuous flow in the Himalaya as compared to that of other Indian rivers.

For river devotees, the maintenance of the river’s ability to move without interruption is linked with notions of what makes a water entity holy or sacred. It must be flowing, they argue, for it to retain its divine qualities. The discourses that used this logic were not ignorant of the other dams on the Ganga that already block or redirect its water. Rather, it was because of the existence of those projects that some people felt it to be of paramount importance that the last and cleanest of the Ganga’s free-flowing stretch be preserved. These arguments were folded into assertions about the importance of maintaining the integrity of the area surrounding holy places (tirth) such as Uttarkashi, as well as the wider region of the Garhwal Himalaya.

Dam proponents and environmentalists contributed to the cultural politics by pushing back on the meanings that river devotees attached to the significance

of a specific stretch of flow. For dam proponents, such as the representative of the NTPC company, it is unfounded to claim that any part of the river is more special than another. Following this logic, it would therefore be a stretch to contend that the disruption of a section of the Ganga hinders the faith that Hindus have for its entirety. For environmentalists, it is ill advised to lean too heavily on cultural and religious discourses when at issue in the microcosm of development on the Ganga is the fate of all of India's precarious and poorly managed rivers. If we are serious about promoting something akin to sustainability, they point out, we need policies that can save every river in India that is being choked, polluted, diverted, and drained.

What these diverse perspectives often bypass are the specific ways that people connect to the Ganga in the Garhwal Himalaya. In chapter 2, I zoom in on the relationships that rural and semi-urban women forge with the Ganga to explore the nuances of human and nonhuman affect that were left out of the national conversations. Through the engagement of their concerns, I enter discussions of the importance of everyday practice along the river, the interface between proximity to the Ganga and identity, the affect or love that people express for the river's running waters, and the mechanisms through which people try to express their concerns.

# INTERLUDE

## WHY WOULDN'T WE CRY?

**A**PRIL 26, 2009: In the early morning hours, a few dozen people gather in the center of Uttarkashi to embark on a journey to Gangotri, a pilgrimage town located 22 kilometers (15 miles) below the Ganga's glacial source. Huddled together in the morning light and bundled against the spring chill, the sixty-some travelers greet one another while they wait for the bus. Most of those assembled are low-income women who rose between 2 a.m. and 3 a.m. to tend to livestock and household chores. They sacrificed precious sleeping hours to fulfill their domestic duties before the start of the two-day pilgrimage. The occasion marking the journey is the temple's seasonal opening and the concomitant return of the goddess Ganga from her somewhat warmer winter home at Mukva village. The main purpose of the trip that day, however, is to raise awareness about the threats to the Ganga's flow.

At around 5:30 a.m., a noisy and cumbersome vehicle arrives to carry the campaign participants up the winding mountain roads. Before leaving, the group organizes a small demonstration to announce the program. They parade through the streets of Uttarkashi with banners and picket signs urging people to "save" the Ganga. Shouting slogans, the group breaks the silence of daybreak with their call-and-response chants. The sounds reach inside the gated walls of the district officer's residence, the region's most important official, and he comes outside to greet us. After receiving his blessing—he is a devout Hindu who expresses concern for the river's well-being—we march back to the vehicle and begin our journey. When the bus is fully loaded, the women sing songs in celebration of the Ganga and the Himalaya in which it resides. The songs last hours into

the trip, subsiding only when we reach the construction sites of several hydroelectric projects. The earthmoving equipment, tunnel drilling, and artificial channel building cast a shadow of silence over the otherwise lively group.

We reach Gangotri in the late afternoon after completing a 70-mile journey. The procession resumes where it left off in Uttarkashi. Once more, the banners and picket signs are paraded on display. Yet again, the slogans ring out: "Let the Ganga flow free!" someone yells. "Let the Ganga remain pure!" the group answers. Marching slowly and deliberately, we walk past the hotels and souvenir shops that line the narrow lanes of the pilgrimage town. Turning right at the goddess's temple, we veer down toward the riverbed. Before we reach the steps leading to the river, the women in our procession stop to bow before the shrine marking the site where Hindus believe King Bhagirath did hundreds of years of penance to bring the Ganga to earth. It is only after paying their respects to this ancestor that we proceed to the river.

When we reach the ghat, many cannot believe their eyes; the Ganga is nowhere in sight. White sand and rocks are all that line the riverbed. Beside us on the steps leading to the river, day laborers are reinforcing the embankment. Their cement-and-steel-laying machinery sends a mixture of droning and shrill cries into the air. The people in our group squint their eyes at the blindingly bright sight of the dry riverbed and cup their ears against the construction noise. Many look to one another in confusion, tears welling up in their eyes.

Gathered on the empty banks, members of the procession begin to voice their indignation. One of the first to speak is Radhika, a woman from Uttarkashi. Radhika is part of a core group of roughly ten women and four or five men who have been involved in efforts to clean the Bhagirathi Ganga in Uttarkashi since the late 1990s. Since 2006, she has been very vocal in her opposition to new hydroelectric projects on the river. Although she is normally an animated speaker, Radhika is exceptionally emotional when she begins to talk. After shouting out a homage to the river and its goddess ("Jay Ganga maiya ki!"), she lambasts everyone she can think of who might be responsible for the sight before our eyes. Her denunciation includes remarks against the government, whom she blames for not taking better care of the river. But the emphasis of her speech is on the lack of water: "Today," she says, "the steps of this ghat lead to an empty river." Then she sobs: "Oh Mother, Our Queen! The Sustainer of the Universe . . . Where has she gone? What have they done? On the platform where people were scared for fear of falling [into turbulent waters], today it is dry. They have ruined it!" Radhika's chest heaves at these words, her hands gesticulating wildly toward the riverbed.

Following Radhika, another woman addresses the gathering. The speaker, Nirmala, also criticizes the government's lack of proactive efforts, and she calls for all the nations



FIGURE 7. A “Save the Ganga” Rally in Gangotri

of the world to step forward and protect the Ganga's flow. Involved in the river cleaning and dam opposition efforts alongside Radhika, she summarizes their efforts: “For the last ten years, we’ve been working and telling people that our Ganga should be kept clean (*swacch*) and that the flow should be uninterrupted (*aviral*). [We also say] that our glaciers should be cared for. In this region, there are so many dams. They create a lot of pollution. It impacts our glaciers. When our Ganga, our National [River] Ganga, is in such

a state, why wouldn't we cry?" Nirmala's comments position the development policies as hypocritical because they target a resource on a "national" river that the government declares to be a symbol of Indian heritage. In a situation where the Ganga's state seems to be deteriorating, perhaps because of the rise of development projects and the melting of upstream glaciers, a concerted effort is needed. In the absence of such measures, and considering the river's plight, tears are an apt response.

After the speeches finish, we began to comb the riverbed for plastics and other debris. Early in the cleaning campaign, someone notes with great relief that a small sliver of flow had been redirected to the other side of the riverbed. Nearly abandoning their cleaning project, most of the women make their way over a mound of boulders that hide the thin stream. Their eyes meet the deep blue of the river's glacial flow, and they immediately rush forward with laughter and cries of joy to ceremonially bathe in the icy waters. Although the flow is smaller than it should be for that time of year, the ability to access the Ganga means that the journey has been worthwhile and that the campaign efforts would be blessed.

From that moment onward, the mood changes. When I meet up with the women later in the evening, after everyone has rested, they sit in a small room adjacent to the Gangotri *mandir* and sing Hindu devotional songs, or bhajan, late into the night. Their energies seem to increase as they sing. At some points in the evening, unseen forces possess singing bodies and they twist, turn, and yell fiercely before collapsing onto the floor. I capture one of these moments on film. When I look back at the videos later, I am struck by how unperturbed most of the women are by the sights and sounds emanating from the ferociously flailing bodies that surround them. They seem accustomed to these moments of possession, these indications of divine encounter.

## 2

### LOVING THE GANGA

#### Semi-Urban Women and Religious Affect

**T**HERE ARE MOMENTS IN FIELDWORK when everything suddenly comes into perspective. I had one such experience midway through my time in Uttarkashi. I was at home, typing up notes from the previous day of interviews, when someone called from below my second-story flat to announce that I had a visitor. This was unexpected; since I lived in a village about 3 kilometers (2 miles) outside of the center of Uttarkashi, people usually called and invited me over when they wanted to talk. What was even more surprising was that when I descended the stairs, I saw that my visitor was a man I did not know very well. After I greeted him, he rushed to explain that this was a neighborly visit. In fact, he lived directly next door. I had interviewed his wife and a few other women from the village a few days prior, so he was aware of my research. Upon hearing that I was interested in the Ganga, he decided to pay me a visit to share his knowledge. “I am a priest,” he explained, “so I know everything there is to know about the subject.”

While my visitor was well-meaning, the exchange was awkward. Once we were seated on a patio outside the family home above which I lived, he immediately launched into a discussion of the Ganga’s role in various historical Hindu texts and scriptures. Some of this context I knew, but much of it was related to a narrow section of Sanskrit scholarship that was not closely relevant to my research project. At some point, when I felt I had a moment to interject, I thanked him for his insight and shared that, in actuality, I was increasingly interested in



how the women of the region understood the Ganga's importance. He scoffed audibly at this comment: "Women," he stated, "do not know anything about the Ganga."

The idea that mountain women have little knowledge of the Ganga went against everything I had observed up until that point. As a matter of fact, my research was uncovering exactly the opposite assertion. Mountain women expressed pointed understandings of how and why the Ganga is significant to their cultural practices and to their regional enactments of Hindu faith. The women I met gave such impassioned explanations for why the river goddess is important to them and to mountain traditions (*parampara*) that their enthusiasm for the Ganga was infectious. Despite this, I did at some level understand what my priestly neighbor was trying to say: many mountain women have less knowledge, relative to educated men, of the texts in which the Ganga's scriptural valences and ritual uses are itemized. The criticism of women's diminished textual understandings serves as a launching point into the everyday practice and lived ritual enactments that are instructive for mountain women. The ways that mountain women come to know, appreciate, and love the Ganga are linked with a variety of cultural practices that women find meaningful.

At the heart of this chapter is an effort to explain how perceptions of the Ganga's importance are differently understood across socially constructed and performed gender categories.<sup>1</sup> For this discussion, I focus on the insights provided by the semi-urban women most involved in the dam opposition campaigns that took place in Uttarkashi District. This includes an examination of how some semi-urban women in Uttarkashi connect to the Ganga in daily practice and express their concerns for the river. For this, I first share the experiences and life histories of Radhika and Nirmala. Both women expressed their emphatic concern for the Ganga's well-being. Their efforts to convey what they perceived to be at stake included the use of devotional songs that honor the goddess Ganga and her associated waters. As I show here, women like Radhika and Nirmala utilized these cultural forms in dam opposition events. The songs and their performances demonstrate how women narrate and remind others about the Ganga's importance; this is central to the cultural politics in which they engage. Toward the end of the chapter, I indicate how the use of devotional songs also enables women to situate and "author" their own significance in relation to the Ganga.

Three observations require discussion to frame the content that follows. These draw from the insights of feminist scholars such as Shubra Gururani. Gururani (2002) provides a useful qualification for the kinds of knowledge that women

express. She writes, “knowledge comprises a culturally coded set of ideas and events that are imbricated in power and authority and informed by locally specific relation, interests, and politics” (2002, 315).<sup>2</sup> The battle over whose knowledge is considered worthy (including whose knowledge is recognized, circulated, transformed, and transmitted) reflects what she calls “the thorny cultural politics of knowledge and power” (*ibid.*). This is the first insight: that knowledge is wrapped up in social processes that are imbricated within struggles over authority and power. The second insight, and one for which Gururani makes a particularly strong case, is that “women’s knowledge” is not easily separated from “men’s knowledge.” Drawing from her fieldwork in Kumaon (an ethnolinguistic region that neighbors Garhwal), Gururani shows that knowledge is often shared between women and men. She adds that the mutual influence that men and women have on one another does not deny that some knowledge may be exclusively women’s; rather, what she wishes to emphasize is that knowledge of everyday practices are usually generated jointly after negotiations and discussions such that they cannot be neatly categorized as belonging to men or women (2002, 319).<sup>3</sup> The third point that Gururani raises is that, since the men living in the mountains of Uttarakhand are often recognized as “more articulate” than women (especially when women identify as illiterate), the effort to understand what women know about particular topics is important in order to arrive at more comprehensive and socially inclusive understandings. The point, she clarifies, is not merely to carefully uncover women’s knowledge, “but to explore the cultural politics of knowledge production which gives men the power to overlook systematically and marginalise women’s knowledge” (2002, 320).

It is because of the insights provided by scholars like Gururani that my male neighbor’s visit led to a moment of clarity. At the time, I was continually being told by the educated men I interviewed to go back to Hindu scriptures if I wanted to understand the Ganga’s value and the impact that the river’s lack of flow might have on cultural practices in the mountains. When my neighbor said that “women do not know anything” about the Ganga, it was a reminder that women’s knowledge was important to further my goal of highlighting the numerous facets of connection to the river and its goddess that may otherwise go unnoticed by those not fortunate enough to do long-term fieldwork in the Garhwal Himalaya. This did not mean that I overlooked men’s knowledge; rather, it meant that I tried to understand how women’s understandings of the Ganga were set within a set of gendered knowledge practices and power relations that men and women continually negotiate in everyday life.

## GENDERED KNOWLEDGE PRACTICES: SOME CONTEXT

Time spent in recreational activities can be influential to the development of gendered knowledge practices, and for this reason such activities are a focus of this chapter. For the semi-urban women living in Uttarkashi, two main sources of recreation were prominent: one involved going to the Ganga's banks to commune with the river; another involved gathering with other women to sing songs that praise Hindu gods and goddesses. These two devotional acts are related to a cultural movement known as *bhakti*. Bhakti is important because it emerged alongside the rise of collective practices of goddess worship more than a millennium ago.<sup>4</sup>

A main cultural form for the bhakti movement is the use of devotional song. The melodies employed are orally transmitted and available to all, regardless of gender. This was and is important because, in the past, women were excluded from Hindu devotional practices. In many ways, the use of song in bhakti is designed to produce ecstatic states, allowing devotees to feel closer to the force (*shakti*) of the divine (see also Pintchman 1994; Wadley 1977). Along with acts of pilgrimage, such embodied practices offer an "easier mode of salvation" when compared with other Hindu rituals (Arya 2004, 5).

A key element of the bhakti movement is the communal act of devotion that it enables. The word *bhakti*, according to Christian Lee Novetzke, conveys this sense (2007, 257):

Bhakti . . . appears in a number of South Asian religions, but particularly in Hinduism, where it signals a host of meanings that circulate around its Sanskrit verbal root, *bhaj*, 'to share, to apportion,' and hence comes most commonly to indicate love, sharing, worship, and devotion. This verbal root has other associations too, however. The most common include: to divide, distribute, and bestow; to obtain as one's share, to enjoy or possess; to resort to, engage in, assume (as a form), put on (garments); to experience; to practice or cultivate; to choose; to serve and adore.

In this formulation, bhakti is primarily about the performance and celebration of faith. As for the noun, *bhakta*, it refers to a person (or in some cases a thing) who manifests some qualities of bhakti. Thus, Novetzke notes, "a *bhakta* is

someone who is devoted, who serves, who is associated with a community, and who is faithful and loyal” (ibid.).

Bhakti is popular with women because, in addition to fostering a mode of commensal devotion, it helps to establish a direct relationship among devotees to the divine without the mediation of the Brahmin priests. Notably, the practices associated with bhakti were important to many of the Uttarkashi women involved in the dam oppositions. Sometimes the women joined in the bhakti gatherings organized by others, and sometimes they arranged to meet at temples in Uttarkashi where they could celebrate the divine through song (which they either called *bhajan* or *kirtan*). After singing the praises of various gods and goddesses, the sessions often ended with women discussing current news items or inviting one another to take place in upcoming events. For the period of the dam opposition campaigns, this could include requests that women join in rallies or public protests. The trip up to Gangotri described in the interlude was one such event that featured mostly semi-urban women because they encouraged one another to join the program after an unrelated devotional gathering. All the way up to that location, which hosts a famous temple to the Ganga (along with an embodiment of the Ganga housed within the temple), the women sang songs as reminders of the goddess’s cultural and religious significance.<sup>5</sup>

It is because of the particularities of knowledge sharing and campaign recruitment that I begin this chapter with a discussion of how women come to understand the religious reasons for why the Ganga’s waters are valuable. In chapter 3, when transitioning to look at the disparate motivations of semi-urban and rural women, I examine how livelihood questions and concerns for “the environment” also come into play.

## LEARNING WITH SEMI-URBAN WOMEN

I met my main interlocutors after numerous visits to Uttarkashi District. The women I came to know best, and who generously imparted their knowledge and experiences to me, were not necessarily those with the highest profiles in the region or in the movements. Yet, from 2007 to 2010, these women were extremely committed to defending the Ganga from large dams. Fortunately, in getting to know people in short-term visits before my main period of fieldwork, I established myself in a network that eventually put me in contact with women

such as Sarita, introduced in the interlude to chapter 1, as well as people such as Radhika, Nirmala, and Lakshmi. There were many other women who were important to the movements and to my efforts to understand them, of course, but these particular women opened their homes, shared their stories, and allowed me to partake in their journeys in ways that were especially eye-opening.

The process of building rapport took a long time, longer than I initially anticipated. I was introduced to Sarita through the ashram described in the aforementioned interlude. Because of the ashram's visible activity, I met her early in the summer of 2007 soon after their efforts began. I met Lakshmi in late 2008 when we were put in touch by a mutual friend who was related to her in a round-about way. A prominent village leader, Lakshmi was possibly the most informed about the technicalities of the dam-building concerns and the histories of struggle in the region. She was also well connected with other leaders, politicians, and political groups in the area.

I did not meet Radhika and Nirmala until early 2009 when I began researching on a full-time basis. Although I did not encounter them at a large multi-organization event in New Delhi at the beginning of that year (which was called a Ganga Sammelan), they noticed me there and saw that I was acquainted with numerous attendees and with meeting organizers. It was the other contacts I made at that meeting that eventually put me in touch with Radhika and Nirmala; one of these contacts was Ravi, Radhika's son. At the meeting when I introduced myself, Ravi did not pay me much heed, possibly based on the assumption that I was only interested in the sound bites that others, such as journalists, were documenting. When I followed up with him later in the month back in Uttarakashi, he obligingly, but somewhat suspiciously, spoke to me about his concerns. After mentioning that his mother was also active in the campaigns, he took me to meet Radhika (at my request). For almost two hours, they sat and shared the story of how they got involved in the efforts to defend the Ganga and they explained the particularities of their concerns. Ravi announced at the end of our exchange that I must "have what I need" for my study and, to my surprise and dismay, he wished me good luck in writing up my "report." It took some time (several weeks and months of showing up at meetings, campaign organizing events, and protests) for Ravi and others like him to understand that I intended to get what he later appreciatively called a "deep" (*gehra*) understanding of what was going on and how mountain women related to, and were involved in, the campaigns.

It was at a campaign organizing event in February 2009 that I first met Nirmala. Ravi invited me to the gathering, which took place on the rooftop of Uttarkashi's Hanuman Temple. Eight or nine women were in attendance, along with Ravi, two of his friends, and the father of the family member I lived with in Uttarkashi—a man I refer to as “Uncle,” as is the customary label for an older man with whom one shares relatives, even if those relatives are fictive kin. Uncle was a well-educated man, and he spoke at length at the start of the meeting. He brought with him a newspaper clipping of the work of Dr. Masaru Emoto, the Japanese physician known for capturing images of water crystals to demonstrate the emotions and healing power that the crystals can transmit.<sup>6</sup> The images in the newspaper demonstrated how polluted water held a disfigured form whereas water that was revered and prayed to had a pleasing and hexagonal snowflake-like symmetry. Uncle pointed to those images and declared that science was now catching up with what Indians have long known about the significance of respecting and protecting water sources so that they can reciprocate with healing energy. Ganga is the ultimate symbol of water's power to bless and care for humans, he commented, and that is why the efforts to defend it from desecration are so important. The women in the meeting nodded their heads. Only one of them asked to look at the newspaper clipping, and the rest just looked quickly at the water drop images printed on the page. It was at this moment that I began to suspect that many of these women were perhaps not able to read.

The young men and Uncle spoke for most of the meeting, but two women, Radhika and Nirmala, jumped in whenever they felt they had something important to contribute. Nirmala's voice had a high-pitched tone that could sound like she was yelling angrily even when she said something in a matter-of-fact way. This was common to several other women from the villages that I knew and, because I had already experienced it as a regional manner of gendered speech, I understood not to attach too much meaning to the tone. That said, it did allow Nirmala to effectively interject into any and all conversations; the pitch of her diction was attention grabbing. Radhika had a lower but very powerful way of speaking. The tallest of all the women in most meetings, she also cut a commanding figure. To amplify this, she spoke while gesticulating often and in very precise movements that let you know she meant what she said.

There were moments in the meeting at Hanuman Temple when some of the men in attendance suggested to the women, and to Radhika and Nirmala in particular, what they should say to the journalists. Nirmala nodded as they gave



FIGURE 8. Village Recruitment Efforts of the Dam Opposition

her talking points, and she added some of her own. The men also used the time to write a press release noting their concerns and demands. The text was later read back to everyone and, as before, only one woman asked to read it herself. The rest of the meeting was spent discussing strategies for going from village to village to recruit others (women especially) to the dam opposition campaign.

When we subsequently went on these campaigns in the villages, the young men did most of the talking. They were, indeed, persuasive, but when it came time for Nirmala and Radhika to speak, their words were charged with so much emotion that it appeared people took extra note of what they had to say. Their primary aim in such instances was to remind others of the special feeling that Garhwalis have for Ma Ganga, their sacred mother, and to urge them to rise to defend the goddess's waters in the same way that she has protected them through the ages. Adding to the emotional character of their efforts, they often punctuated their short commentary with songs about the Ganga that were popular, or that they themselves had composed.

The reasons for the particular modes of expression used by people like Radhika and Nirmala become more apparent in the life histories that follow.



Transmitting these stories into writing involves the difficult task of compressing full lives into short, digestible segments. This act of transmission is rife with ethical challenges, representational conundrums, and moral obligations (Davies 2007; Enslin 1994; Visweswaran 1997).<sup>7</sup> What further complicates my representation of women's stories is the fact that I felt cautious about using the real names of my main interlocutors. One of my chief reservations about using their real names is that their actions in the past have earned them derision: some of them have been threatened with assault because of their participation in the dam opposition campaigns. Since the conflict over the dams will likely continue, and since I want to minimize the risks that these women might confront if dam opponents are targeted in the future, I have opted to use pseudonyms. When I shared this decision with my main interlocutors, some expressed disappointment but agreed that it was probably the safest option. The families of these women were present when we discussed this, and several family members readily agreed that it was for the best. In those instances, I worked with the women to choose their substitute appellations. Radhika, for instance, chose her name because of its association with Radha, an iconic devotee of Lord Krishna. I suggested Nirmala's name, and she agreed, for its association with inner purity.<sup>8</sup>

## SONGS AND AFFECT: RADHIKA'S STORY

Of all the women I came to know during my fieldwork in the Garhwal Himalaya, Radhika was the person with whom I spent the most time. There were many reasons for this: Radhika was a prominent participant in Ganga Ahvaan and the Clean the Ganga movement; she also spoke fluently in Hindi even though Garhwali was her mother tongue. This meant that we could communicate with relative ease once we adjusted to one another's accents. Although Radhika was cautious of me at first, it took only a few meetings for us to establish an amiable rapport. I found that she was eager to share her experiences of connection and dedication to the Ganga.

Radhika, like some of the other women I came to know, was quick to adopt me as an honorary family member. She insisted that I refer to her as my aunt (*mausi*), and she was adamant that I visit her home as frequently as possible. It was convenient for me to fulfill this request since the two-bedroom apartment that she shared with her family was centrally located in Uttarkashi. Unlike other women, Radhika seemed to understand that I had many tasks to attend



to during my time in the mountains. This made visits comfortable because I never had to fear that a trip to her home would extend into a series of obligatory meals with the family and potentially even an overnight stay.<sup>9</sup> Although she always asked me to share meals and she invited me to spend the night numerous times, she usually only asked twice and would let me go with a smile and a soft reprimand for not staying longer. With Radhika, I could come and go as I pleased.

I recorded Radhika's life history over at least a dozen visits. Each time I sat with her in her home, I came to know different aspects of her persona and embodied experience. I learned, for instance, that Radhika was from a rural area on the other side of the mountains, in Himachal Pradesh. Her village was near to the valley through which the Yamuna River flows, approximately a day's car ride away. Radhika was not formally educated as a child, and she was married between the ages of sixteen and eighteen. Her husband was a district officer—an educated man with a government salary and a pension—who married her while he was on assignment in an area near her village. They moved to Uttarkashi shortly after their union. Radhika, well into her fifties during the period of my research, had seen the district capital grow over the decades. In that time, she had acquired a number of stories and songs related to the sacred tirth. It gave her immense satisfaction to convey them to a willing audience.

Radhika was a very religious woman. She went to the temples (*mandir*) for daily prayer and was part of a group of women who gathered every Friday to sing devotional songs at the Ganga mandir above Manikarnika ghat in the center of Uttarkashi. Radhika also attended many performances of *kaatha* (the recitation of Hindu stories told over days and weeks) that take place in Uttarkashi throughout the year. These practices, combined with her regular interaction and worship with the Ganga, nurtured her faith. Being a good Hindu was very important to Radhika, and she had clear ideas about what that entailed.

In addition to her affection for major gods in the Hindu pantheon such as Ganga, Shiva, Vishnu, Durga, and Kali, Radhika was also highly devoted to the regional gods (*devi* and *devta*). As I came to learn abruptly one afternoon, she was even a medium for a particular village *devta*. When I first saw her channeling this deity (or perhaps it was the deity channeling her), she was seated cross-legged on one of the cots in the back room of her apartment on an auspicious day in the Hindu calendar, Shivratri. A couple was seated on the cot in front of her in the dimly lit room. Radhika was staring into grains of uncooked rice in

the open palm of her left hand. She spoke angrily while considering these grains, and she punctuated words of disdain by occasionally throwing a few kernels of rice at the couple, and the man in particular. The man nodded humbly at her forceful reprimands. Many of her remarks chastised him for drinking alcohol and demanded that he stop. When the deity was done with the counsel, Radhika blessed them by applying colored pastes and dry rice to their foreheads. I was blessed, too, before being escorted out of the room right before the devta left her body and Radhika collapsed.

I later found out that the devta started coming to Radhika when she was pregnant with her third child. He showed up without warning, she told me, and has been appearing occasionally for over two decades. This devta could be helpful in times of need, such as when Radhika was fearful or full of self-doubt. Radhika recalled that, in early January 2009, she and a number of other people from Uttarkashi were called to attend a “Save Ganga” meeting in Jodhpur, a city in the desert state of Rajasthan in the Indian plains. She and many of the other Garhwali women feared the journey. They had never traveled so far from their homes, and some had never been outside of the mountains. On the bumpy bus ride down the mountains, Radhika prayed to the devta and asked him to keep them safe. He appeared soon after the prayer ended; she experienced a flash of warmth and her hands suddenly shot straight up in the air as he offered a loud blessing. A deep, gravelly voice that did not resemble her own spoke through her body, declaring: “Everything will be alright!” Feeling assured that the journey would be successful, Radhika’s mind was at ease for the rest of the trip. When they arrived at the Jodhpur palace where the meeting took place, Radhika recalled that she was asked to speak before any of the other women. She beamed at this recollection while pointing out that a different woman from their group, a multi-term village leader, was usually chosen to speak first. Of her performance, Radhika said proudly, “I spoke very well. I said many good things. The maharaja [king] of the palace liked it so much that he later called me back up on stage.” She was honored to receive such high praise. But she didn’t know what else to say. So, she remembered, she shared a song that illustrated how in past eras “people were good” and treated the Ganga and each other with respect. As she recalled, her parting words to the congregation were a denouncement of moral degeneracy and a call for a return to righteous action.

Radhika did not receive much formal education as a child, and she struggled with the written word. She, like other women in the movements, often felt that

she had little to say. Her words were limited, and she sensed that they paled in comparison to her deep emotion for the Ganga and her belief that it should be protected from harm. And yet, despite this, Radhika has accomplished quite a bit. Sitting in her living room, one can see numerous pictures of her hanging on the walls in which she is speaking at the podiums of various meetings or receiving a ribbon in recognition of her work to clean up trash from the banks of the Ganga. One of Radhika's speeches is even published in a book; the translation in English takes up a single-spaced page. It was a source of great pride for her even though she cannot read the words. On at least two separate occasions I was shown the photocopied page, and she commented on it many more times. When I asked Radhika to reflect on why it was significant that her actions received attention, she recalled that she used to be shy. But, at the urging of her husband, she slowly began to speak out despite being an "illiterate village woman" (or, as she would frequently remind me in Hindi, "I can't read and write, dear" (*ham parhe likhe waale nahin, bete*). For her, speaking publicly was not important in and of itself; of greater significance was the act of standing for what she believed in and working to defend her beloved Ganga.

Even though Radhika learned to be comfortable speaking in front of a crowd, she still preferred to perform devotional song when given the opportunity. I gathered this not from her responses to my questions but from observation of her actions at several movement events. When asked about the songs, Radhika indicated that they invoke the emotional strength that one gets from being near the Ganga. "When we are singing bhajan," she said, "it feels like Gangaji is there with us."<sup>10</sup> After singing bhajan, or a related devotional repertoire known as *kirtan*, women other than Radhika also said that their minds felt calm and peaceful. An additional part of the reason for this phenomenon is that, according to Hindu belief and the assertions of some scholars, certain sounds carry "sonic healing" and positive energy (Beck 1993).

When asked how it feels to be with the Ganga, either in person or through song, Radhika replied: "It feels good, very good." She added that the Ganga "takes away our pain (*kast*)." Since the devotional songs help to recall and evoke emotions, they are part of the meaning-making practices that people enact to defend the river and its goddess. This is significant because, as Kay Milton asserts, "the process of valuing things in the world is inseparable from the emotions and feelings they induce in us; without these emotions and feelings there would be no value" (2002, 100). It is because of the intertwined nature of emotion and value



FIGURE 9. Women Singing Devotional Song in Uttarkashi, India

that Radhika offers devotional song at movement events and endeavors to channel and harness the feelings that other devotees have for the goddess and her associated waters.

Radhika's story illustrates how she has refashioned her sense of self through her devotion to the Ganga and her participation in movement events. Her self-perception has evolved from that of an "illiterate village woman" to someone whose ideas are worthy of print and whose words can earn the praise of kings. Her transformation builds upon past histories and her negotiation of the challenges and opportunities of everyday life. Radhika's use of devotional song in activist spaces also shows how she was involved in adapting and modifying existing cultural forms, ones which are situated within the legacy of the bhakti tradition, to fit the needs of the present moments of contention. Although Nir-mala's story is different from Radhika's, it is also illustrative of the opportunities that some women experience through movement involvement.

### **SONGS AND CONTENTIOUS PRACTICE: NIRMALA'S STORY**

Like Radhika, Nirmala was one of the most vocal and active of the Uttarkashi women involved in the campaigns to clean the Ganga and to stop the construction of new dams on the river. A middle-aged woman with three children, Nirmala had the unabashed air of someone who no longer cared what was thought of her, and she earnestly desired to make her opinions known. Her comments in campaigns were often interjected in high-pitched tones that sounded like outbursts to those who did not know her otherwise gentle demeanor. Not originally from Uttarkashi, she lived atop a hill overlooking the district capital. The flat she shared with her husband and children sat in the shade of cell phone towers that I could not help but blame for the stomach pains and mystery illnesses that immobilized Nirmala for weeks at a time.

The documentation of Nirmala's life history began during a lull in one of the movement activities in Uttarkashi. One day in early June 2009, a group of us gathered near a bridge on the Ganga to undertake a river cleaning campaign. Since the campaign was scheduled in the middle of the day and it followed on the heels of an earlier event, only a few people showed up. Nirmala was one of only two other women in attendance. I spoke with her before the cleaning program in what became a three-part recording. I started by asking Nirmala what

her family thought of her movement involvement; it was a question that was on my mind because the river cleaning campaign took place at a time when most of the other women I knew were at home cooking the afternoon meal and taking care of their children. Nirmala was quick to reply that her family thinks she is crazy (*paagal*), and their friends reinforced this perception: “The neighbors say to my husband, ‘She’s gone mad. She doesn’t cook for you. She goes to the market alone—what does she do in the market? And she doesn’t even look after her children properly.’” Sometimes, she admitted, her nearly grown son even complains. When he does, she quips back saying, “You aren’t so small anymore . . . If you are home alone, you can cook for yourself!”

These comments were somewhat startling to me because the first time I had gone to Nirmala’s house—back in the beginning of 2009—I had been with six people from Uttarkashi who were active in the river cleaning and dam opposition movements. We had come from campaigning in nearby villages where we were trying to recruit people into the dam opposition efforts by going from house to house. We were exhausted by the time we arrived at Nirmala’s at midafternoon. Seeing this, her husband let us sit in the entry room of their ground-floor apartment (which doubled as the bedroom). In a reversal of roles, the husband went to the kitchen and came out with sweet milk tea for everyone, which he served off a tray. When I reminded Nirmala of this, she laughed. Ravi, who was also with us at that time, overheard our conversation while standing a few steps away. He interjected: “Sister, he didn’t just serve us—he made the tea himself!” This evoked laughter from the five or six other people sitting with us under the tree. The humor stressed what an anomalous act we had witnessed at Nirmala’s house.

But, as Nirmala went on to share, her domestic arrangement had not always been easy. She used to have a lot of difficulty at home. Her husband was once a hard-to-manage drinker. When I asked what had changed, she recalled an event when his drinking had gotten out of hand. One night, with a belly full of hard liquor purchased from the government shops, he made abusive remarks and called her a servant (*gulaam*).<sup>11</sup> After so many nights of similar treatment, this was the final straw; she was fed up. The next morning, while he was still drunk and asleep, she gathered her children and left the house with the intention of moving back to her village. The bus was late, however, and before it arrived her husband awoke and realized she was gone. He found her waiting for the bus on the main road and convinced her to come home. That was the beginning of the changes. Sometime thereafter, Nirmala began to focus more on the activities

outside of the home that interested her, such as the events of the Clean the Ganga movement.

Later, in the last days of my research in December 2009, I recalled Nirmala's transformation with her and her husband at their home. He laughed at the memories. "She says you think she's crazy," I asked. "Is that true?" His grin widened as he affirmed that, yes, she very well may be, but he said it fondly. When she spread out the photos and newspaper clippings of her activism, he rifled through them along with me and smiled collectively at the images. He even offered to helpfully fill in the details of some of the events covered in the news articles because, as Nirmala reminded us, she could not read the Hindi text.

The photos and newspaper clippings were extensive; they covered the entire double bed on which we sat, cross-legged. To this pile, I added the photos I took of Nirmala at movement events over the previous months. She beamed at these new images, claiming that I was one of the few people who followed through with the simple request to distribute photos. Having these memories, she stressed, was meaningful for an uneducated woman such as herself. Unlike the print articles, she could hold up the photos and recite their significance to others. The images were the documentation of her achievements.

When it was appropriate to broach the subject, I asked her to share her motivations in the movements that defend the Ganga's unfettered flow. Nirmala responded with a declaration: "Gangaji is the treasure of our previous births. We have faith in Ganga. Ganga is our mother. She is world famous. She helps us overcome all adversity. We hold our heads high when we hear Ganga's name. Because of her, we can go anywhere and we are successful. Whatever we have is because of the grace of our Ganga."

Nirmala's comments brought up several points. First, she underscored the inheritance the Ganga embodies. She attributed this inheritance to past deeds done by one's ancestors or by oneself in former lives (following the belief in reincarnation). For Nirmala, the person credited with the Ganga's flow was King Bhagirath. As she said immediately after the above-quoted text, "Bhagirath did so much [work] to modify nature . . . we cannot do so much . . . but we do what we can for Ganga." Honoring this ancestor's efforts and the blessings of the river's flow was vitally important for Nirmala. The second point she raised was the Ganga's fame. The notoriety the Ganga achieved was significant for her; it instills so much pride, in fact, that people hold their heads high when they hear the Ganga's name. Since the Ganga is endowed with such great powers, Nirmala credits the river and its goddess for the success that she and others experience in



life. And, as Nirmala went on to reason, “Since Ganga is helping us at each step then we should also be ready to save her.” Her argument stressed the need for reciprocity: “We have to raise our voices for Ganga, that she should flow in her original form. Whatever her path is, let her flow in that way without obstruction. If we put the Ganga in a tunnel, then her form will be totally different; no one will be able to say that Gangaji flows here.”

Losing access to the Ganga was Nirmala’s biggest fear. Casting blame for such an outcome, she criticized the scientists (*vigyānic log*) who were responsible for threatening to remove the Ganga’s flow from the riverbed. They should know, she chastised, that the rains no longer fall in the mountains the way they did. Drawing on knowledge she gained at a recent environmental meeting, she asserted that pollution is increasing in the region, affecting rain quality, spring water, and the health of the glaciers. “We feel like crying,” she explained, in a comment that echoed the sentiments of the interlude, “when we see Mother Ganga in such a state.” After a pause, Nirmala offered to share a poem she composed to emphasize the urgency:

As long as Ganga exists, as long as there is life in the Glacier,  
Till then the glory of Ganga reigns;  
When the glaciers melt,  
Where will one find Ganga’s banks?  
Without Ganga the bodies will rot,  
Leaving reign to dogs and foxes.<sup>12</sup>

Nirmala recited these lines from memory, only faltering once to recall a line. When she was done, she shared that she had many such things to say about the Ganga. She had also composed numerous original songs that sing of the Ganga’s glories. “But,” she mused, “with whom shall I share them?” Shaking her head, she lamented that nobody seemed to care. Even those with faith in the Ganga’s power were not coming forward to defend the river and its goddess, and others believed they might get employment because of the dam construction. The government, she lamented, is the worst offender because it did not pay attention to the faith and devotion of the public.<sup>13</sup> They were ready to let the Ganga “disappear.”

Nirmala’s final criticism was for the engineers who design and implement dam projects. If they are so advanced, she argued, “why don’t they apply their development to something else . . . have they only got the Ganga left for their



development?” No, she countered, they should work on some other and more useful projects to “show that they are [real] scientists.” Diminishing their contributions, she reminded me that Bhagirath was not literate but that he alone brought the Ganga down to earth.

Despite the challenges that she and others confronted to raise awareness about the Ganga’s fragile state, she vowed that they would “keep shouting” even though “nobody listens to our voice.” If their efforts were unsuccessful, she assured me that the Ganga would save herself should the dam builders and officials one day succeed in redirecting the river’s flow. In such a scenario, the Ganga “would definitely show her furious side” by bringing landslides and earthquakes as the goddess had done in the past.

Nirmala’s story demonstrates the challenges she has overcome and the struggles that she continues to face. Her comments especially show how she has navigated what was once a difficult domestic situation and transformed her household relationships. She has done this through a process of slowly standing up for the convictions that she holds most dearly. Paramount among these is her belief that the Ganga’s flow should be clean and without obstruction. In return for her efforts, Nirmala asserted that the Ganga has supported her and others to overcome numerous hardships in life. To show her gratitude, she engaged herself even more in movement processes and in the composition of poems and songs that praise the Ganga and warn against harming the river’s flow. In essence, she pointed to a mutually beneficial relationship that has allowed her to pursue opportunities for personal and spiritual growth.

## **DEVOTIONAL SONG: A GENDERED GENRE OF DISCOURSE**

The context I have provided points to some of the reasons why devotional songs are a popular speech medium for women in the Garhwal region of the Himalaya. In contemporary practice, women frequently use songs in their repertoires of daily work, worship, and protest. For this reason, scholars such as Anjali Capila (2002) approach rural Garhwali women’s songs (which she calls “folksongs”) as a “source material” that reflects various sociocultural images of women, including commentary on their daily practice and livelihood struggles.

In the terms used by Dorothy Holland and Jean Lave, songs are important “cultural forms of communication” in the Himalaya that help to build dialogues

about the self (2001, 7). Examples of cultural forms of dialogue include the Tij festival songs that Holland et al. (1998) explored in Nepal. The authors draw on a sociohistorical perspective influenced by Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin (including his use of “dialogism”) to show how Tij songs are cultural forms that women use to position themselves in relation to the harsh, often oppressive, realities of daily life. These songs help construct spaces in which women can voice discontent. They additionally enable possibilities for imagining alternate visions of social and political life that include the improved treatment of women (ibid., 253–54).

In the context of the Garhwal Himalaya, I suggest that women use devotional songs to evoke and remind others of the cultural worlds in which the Ganga is featured as an entity of paramount importance. The performance of these songs has an intent that is distinct from the Tij festivals in Nepal in which women share melodies that critique social conditions and imagine alternative worlds. However, the performance of devotional song does open spaces within which women can voice dissent. Musical power, after all, operates at the nexus that exists between expressions of power in social interaction and in musical events (Alter 2008, 220). Musical performances, in other words, “are forums in which musicians may reverse normal relationships of power. Such reversals are themselves powerful acts because they challenge conventions” (ibid.). What is more, the songs and their performance have transformative effects, especially in the realm of intimate subjectivities and identity making, a dynamic I explore below.

In stressing women’s use of devotional song in the Garhwal Himalaya, I do not wish to indicate that it is a verbal genre that is always gendered. Devotional song is an especially popular cultural form because it fits well within the history of a nation and a geographical region with strong oral storytelling traditions. The most famed of the sacred texts associated with Hinduism were transmitted orally long before they were written down many hundreds of years after their creation. Samarendra Arya (2004), for instance, states that a specific text, the *Rig Veda*, was recited for over three thousand years before it was preserved in Sanskrit text. And, as the work of Sax (2002) details, there are numerous past and contemporary oral performances in Garhwal that bridge well-known mythologies with regionally adapted variations. These include the Pandav Lila, a performance genre that draws from the *Mahabharata* (mentioned earlier). In speaking of performance generally and the practices of the Garhwal region in particular, Sax argues: “Public ritual performances are an especially powerful means for creating

(and sometimes undermining) selves, relationships, and communities, precisely because they inscribe cultural concepts on the whole person, the body as well as the mind, and they do so by requiring of their participants a public, embodied assent to those concepts" (2002, 12). In his opinion, these performances are important for reinforcing a sense of community.

Sax's 2002 observations overlap with insights put forward by others, who claim that performance traditions in India often draw upon "local ideologies" to help "shape a community's self-identity" (Blackburn et al. 1989, 11). These are arguments with which Émile Durkheim (1915) could have agreed; he proposed that collective rituals serve to create and foster solidarity among groups of various kinds. Thinking of religious rituals, for instance, Durkheim once wrote: "Religion is first and foremost a system of ideas by means of which individuals imagine the society of which they are members and the obscure yet intimate relations they have with it. Such is its paramount role" (1915, 227).

The difference between the expressive cultures that Blackburn et al. draw on and the ones I explore is that the songs of devotion to the Ganga emerge from minor stories featured only in select Hindu epics. The songs are not well-known nationally. Women compose many of the songs in Garhwali, but they also sometimes perform them in Hindi. These regional melodies are quite significant to their singers, and they use them at specific moments and with targeted aims. The songs and their messages, in other words, are part of the cultural politics that assert how and why the Ganga is important. Counter to Sax (2002) and even aspects of Anderson's (1983) work, therefore, I do not solely argue that these melodies are primarily designed to call on a real or imagined "community." Instead, I aim to emphasize how the songs express the love that is felt for the Ganga while reminding people of its importance by evoking the cultural worlds that recollect the river's history and worth. The Ganga's historical-cosmological positioning, in turn, helps people to "author" themselves in relation to its sacred flow. I now turn to an example that illustrates these points.

## **DEVOTIONAL SONGS IN ACTIVIST SPACE: EXPLORING PERFORMANCE**

On July 11, 2009, a rally was held in Uttarkashi, Uttarakhand, to protest the ongoing work at upstream dam construction sites. The participants in these protests believed that the construction activities were in violation of a government

suspension of the projects. The rally attracted between 200 and 250 people, and most of the audience members were women from Uttarkashi and the villages that surround the district capital. The turnout was credited to Ganga Ahvaan and their pre-event efforts to garner the support and participation of villagers. Commuting by bus and local transportation, these villagers arrived in Uttarkashi in the late morning. Several activists from New Delhi, Haridwar, and Rishikesh met them there.

The rally involved three main tactics. One of these was a boisterous march through the streets of Uttarkashi in which the procession members yelled slogans against the dam-building company. This was a common tactic employed in every rally for and against dams that I observed during my fieldwork. Such efforts were meant to influence public perception and show support for a cause by decibels generated.

The second tactic employed was a roadblock (*chakka jaam*). This involved assembling at the narrowest point of the road passing through Uttarkashi to obstruct traffic. When the rally participants reached this spot, they sat down in the middle of the road. Numbering more than one hundred people, they covered a sizeable area and rendered the road impassable for vehicles. From the video taken by Ganga Ahvaan members, this was also a key moment for yelling slogans and holding up large signs denouncing the dam building. The chants demanded that the hydroelectric projects be closed, and they called for the demise of the dam construction companies. As in other rallies, they chanted slogans demanding that the Ganga flow freely so that the river could retain its purity. They also reprimanded the actions of state and central governments; a large banner declared: "Rivers are common property, they don't belong to the government! Don't obstruct them, let them flow!"<sup>14</sup> To the side of the main banner, a picket sign read: "Save the environment! Save our culture! Stop the dams!"<sup>15</sup> Another popular chant, which I frequently heard the Ganga Ahvaan members from New Delhi employ, positioned the struggle against dams as a fight for the welfare of the nation; they yelled: "Save Ganga! Save India!" This was followed by an inversion of the statement: "Save India! Save Ganga!"<sup>16</sup>

The third tactic, and the one I want to highlight, was a public gathering in front of a regional government building called the Collectorate. Rally participants congregated on a field adjacent to the government facilities and staged a series of speeches from that location. Several men spoke into a microphone attached to a mobile loudspeaker system. A prominent Ganga Ahvaan activist from New Delhi also invited several of the women to speak. One of these was

a village leader by the name of Sarojini. In the video taken by Ganga Ahvaan, Sarojini accepted the request to speak in front of the large crowd that gathered; instead of speaking, however, she launched into a call-and-response song. The women in the audience, most of whom were seated on the ground, sang along with Sarojini. Common in many of the songs expressed, it gave the genealogy of the Ganga's descent to the earth, it emphasized the role that King Bhagirath played in the river's inception, and it commented on the sacred geography of the Himalaya through which the river flows. There were two main refrains to this song: the first was, "My Gangaji" (*meri gangaji*), and the second was, "[My] Lovely Gangaji" (*pyari gangaji*). This song was presented in lieu of an oration. It bears noting, however, that another woman—the earlier-introduced Sarita—did make a short speech. Her comments were so well received that an image of her speaking to the crowd was published in the Hindi language newspaper the following day. When Sarita recalled the experience, she giggled with the recollection that she had never spoken in front of such a large crowd. She was scared at first, she said, but she thought of Ganga and the words flowed easily.

I followed up with the participants in this rally to capture post-event commentary and reflection on what had transpired. I caught up with Sarojini (the song leader) a few weeks after the event when I went to the ashram affiliated with Ganga Ahvaan to view the rally videos. Although she was not part of the ashram, I came on a date when the Ganga Ahvaan organizers were meeting with key village leaders to give them an update on the government decisions and the legal battles that were likely to ensue. I spoke with Sarojini in a pause between meetings, asking first why she chose to sing instead of giving a speech. "Many people spoke before I did," she answered, "and they said everything that was in my heart. What else could I say?" This was a common response I received when asking women why they chose to pass up speaking opportunities or why they elected to sing instead of speak. My informants often said they refrained from repeating what others said if they had nothing new to contribute. Some directly commented on their intellectual insecurities. One woman even claimed that her thinking was "fat" (dense and cumbersome; *moti*) and said she preferred not to demonstrate this publicly.

When I asked Sarojini why she chose the song that she sang, she brushed the question aside by saying, "There are so many songs about Gangaji." I was unsure of how to get a more precise explanation, so I reminded her of other possible songs that she could have sung. Although I did not sing it entirely (for

the benefit of her ears), I shared lines of a song that Sarita taught me during our first encounter. The first line is repeated throughout as the refrain:

Ganga is the purest stream; there is no other stream like hers, (2x)  
 She is the essence of life; there is no other essence, (2x + Refrain)  
 Love God, there is no other love, (2x + Refrain)  
 Universal love is the essence; nothing else will suffice, (2x + Refrain)  
 Sing, "Glory to Ganga!"

Sarojini nodded to acknowledge this tune and laughed at my modest, off-key rendition. "We sing such songs in the villages," she told me, implying that the song I shared was not appropriate for the rally. When Sarojini did not elaborate, I asked why so many women attended the event. "It was an emergency," she said. "The Ganga is disappearing . . . They are taking Ganga inside the tunnels." This is worrisome, she reminded me, because people will lose land because of the dam construction and their livelihoods could be threatened. And, she added, access to the Ganga is important for the observance of Hindu rituals. "We need Ganga for everything . . . We are connected to her our whole lives." It was impossible, in her view, to think of being without access to the Ganga. I share these latter comments, despite their similarities to earlier utterances, to clarify Sarojini's perception of the issues and the threats to human relationships with the river. It is the relational aspect of connection to the Ganga that pervades these subjectivities, and they are, in turn, informed by historical precedents.

## NARRATIVES, PERFORMANCES, AND SPACES OF AUTHORIZING

I argue that there are three main reasons why women often employ songs about the Ganga in activist spaces. First, these songs help to narrate the river's story; the narration generates meaning about the Ganga, (re)establishes the importance of living alongside it and receiving its blessing, and evokes the cultural worlds that position the river as a Hindu goddess. Second, the songs help devotees call forth the presence of the goddess Ganga, fostering affect and making people feel like they have her support. Third, the use of established cultural forms of expression allows women to participate in the river's defense despite

perceived disadvantages (such as a lack of education). Thus, their participation via the cultural form of devotional song helps women to assert agency, and it informs subjectivities and notions of self-worth.

On the first point, as alluded to above, the songs that narrate the genealogy of the Ganga are the most likely to be recited by women in activist spaces. The melodies shared by Radhika and Nirmala, as well as Sarojini, were of this type. It is telling that, when asked, Sarojini notes that there are “many songs about the Ganga”; yet, when I shared with her a tune that urges people to love the Ganga and God, she acknowledged it without suggesting that it would have been interchangeable with the one she sang in the rally. If I am interpreting her silence correctly, the question becomes: Why not? Why are the songs that narrate the Ganga’s birth and the role that King Bhagirath played so useful in efforts to defend the river?

One possible explanation is the narrative potential that some of the devotional songs provide to women in the dam opposition movements. Narratives help to establish a perspective, viewpoint, or understanding of events (past and present). Since narration is set in conversation with real or imagined phenomena, narratives are a social process and a “performance in action” (Cortazzi 2001, 384). The act of narration, therefore, is an interactive process that jointly constructs and interprets experiences with others. Narrative analysis, then, enables us to examine participant roles in constructing accounts and in negotiating perspectives and meanings (*ibid.*).

The focus on meaning making through narratives is extremely significant. The songs that share the Ganga’s genealogy are powerful because they remind people of the reasons why the river and its goddess came down to earth—the primary one being human salvation. This helps offset efforts to objectify and commodify the river’s flow. In situations where the Ganga is treated solely as a good to be manipulated for energy generation and material gain, the genealogical songs evoke a cultural world in which the Ganga is a unique river with a history that cannot be overlooked. These meaning-making practices are significant to examine because they influence how people choose to act. As Anne Rademacher asserts when looking at the ways that certain meanings of Nepal’s Bagmati River influence its treatment, “We are concerned with the production of meaning because it is closely associated with human agency. It is the meaningful account of reality, after all, that motivates purposeful human action” (2011, 28).

To elaborate on the second point, the historical significance and genealogical thinking conveyed in the songs is deeply significant. It connects to notions

of subjectivity and identity. Reflecting on the river's history, for instance, Sarita expressed her fear that future generations will not know the value of the Ganga if it one day stops flowing in the riverbed. "When Ganga will be stopped [and redirected into the tunnels], then our children and their children will not [be able to] think that once there was a huge Ganga flowing like an ocean." Sarita's worries that it would become "like a myth" that the Ganga once flowed through the Himalaya were related to her fear that future generations would lose a sense of what makes it special to reside in the Bhagirathi Ganga Valley. She later elaborated on the implications of this, saying: "When (the) Ganga is no more . . . we won't have any identity."

The use of the word identity, or *pehchaan*, is significant. In the sense that Sarita used it, *pehchaan* is meant to indicate a hallmark or main characteristic with which something or someone is associated. Her subsequent statements exemplified this use of the word: "This is the identity of these mountains," she said. "It [our identity] is Mother Ganga." Expanding on the identity theme, she shared that mountain residents who live along the river are called the "children of the Ganga" (*gangaputri*). This label indicates proximity to, connection with, and affect for the river; it is a source of pride. Sarita reinforced this sentiment when she said that mountain men gain respect while working in the plains after sharing that they come from villages nestled along the river's banks. And, in a final employment of *pehchaan*, Sarita transferred this regional pride to all the (Hindu) residents of India: "The culture of India is Ganga itself," she said. "We are residents of that country in which the Ganga flows." This comment used the river to fashion a pan-Indian identity, albeit one that is Hindu-centric.

Because of all the sensitivities that the Ganga's genealogy and geography generate, the songs that employ the story of King Bhagirath have more affective influence than tunes that merely praise the river. They also help people to argue for their own importance vis-à-vis the flow of the Ganga. In so doing, the songs enable a process of identity meditation. This point merits explanation. Identities, as Holland et al. argue, are the "imaginings of self in worlds of action" (1998, 5). They are, in other words, social products that are lived in and through activity. In positioning identities as a process developed in social practice, they argue, "we are always engaged in forming identities, in producing objectifications of self-understandings that may guide subsequent behavior" (ibid). This stance emphasizes that identities are improvised "in the flow of activity within specific social situations," from the cultural resources and artifacts at hand. "Thus," they explain, "persons and, to a lesser extent, groups are caught in the tensions between



past histories that have settled in them and the present discourses and images that attract them or somehow impinge upon them. In this continuous self-fashioning, identities are hard-won standpoints that, however dependent upon social support and however vulnerable to change, make at least a modicum of self-direction possible" (ibid., 4).<sup>17</sup>

## LINKED FIELDS: RELIGION, PRACTICE, AND CULTURAL POLITICS

Part of this chapter situated devotional song as a cultural form with sociohistorical links to the bhakti tradition. In the contemporary Garhwal Himalaya, devotional song is a key communication resource employed by women to position the Ganga as an entity of paramount importance whose flow is the product of an ancestor's penance and a treasure to defend for current and future generations. By sharing the genealogy of the Ganga's birth and descent to earth, the songs help to remind the singers and the audience why and how the Ganga matters. I have argued that the space created by devotional song calls forth the goddess Ganga and enables people to feel that she is with them and that they have her support. The songs also allow women to recognize themselves as ardent devotees and to speak on the goddess's behalf.

My analysis of the use of devotional song has additionally explored its role as a practice that leads to the transformation of some women's subjectivities. To illustrate this, I shared two women's journeys and highlighted their use of devotional song in movement processes. Both identified as illiterate women with village upbringings who were once timid to speak in public. Compelled by their devotion to the Ganga and their fears of the changes taking place, they slowly began speaking out. In so doing, their movement involvement fostered personal and subjective transformations. Radhika's participation in efforts to defend the Ganga was a source of pride. Nirmala's movement involvement has enabled her to navigate contentious practices at home and to redefine her roles as a mother and a wife. In their own ways, both women have been able to challenge gendered expectations and upset historical structures of privilege.<sup>18</sup>

To put it in other words, the localized politics of defending the Ganga that the semi-urban women in Uttarkashi underwent also entailed the politics of culture. This assertion involves an amplified understanding of culture and how

it is mediated in Garhwal. Observations from work by Sax help to explain how and why this is important:

The social theory of a generation ago often assumed that culture was shared and universal, something that existed “in the heads” of a given people at a certain place and time, something that was, therefore, only indirectly political. More recently, anthropologists have come to recognize that many voices and interpretations compete in a given cultural arena; in other words, that culture is more like a contested battlefield than an impregnable fortress. From this perspective, interpretation is a political act, and whatever else they may be, the multiple interpretations analyzed here—those of competing priestly factions, of women and men, of untouchables and high-caste Hindus—are also weapons in ongoing struggles and must be seen in that light. (Sax 1991, 11)

The ways of knowing and loving the Ganga highlighted in this chapter speak directly to women’s efforts to engage in the “contested battlefield” that is culture, and cultural politics more broadly. In many ways, these observations bring us back to the insights of Gururani. If we momentarily replace the word *culture* for *knowledge*, her commentary aligns nicely; she writes: “knowledge should not be seen as an unchanging and codified body but as a set of social relations that are dynamic and fundamentally embedded in practice” (2002, 321). It is because of this that she asks us not to engage in the “fetishizing” of women as “embodiments of special knowledge.” Instead, she insists that we attend to the cultural context in which women have come to hold particular knowledges. These contexts involve gendered power relations and disparate experiences of everyday practices. In recognizing the specifics of women’s lived experiences and accumulated knowledges, it is necessary not only to celebrate women’s knowledge as distinct and special “but also to attend to the cultural politics of power and knowledge which marginalise” women and their knowledge (ibid).

To further the exploration of women’s lived experiences, the text turns to the diversity of concerns for the Ganga that emerged as women from various socio-economic and geographical contexts worked to defend the river and its goddess from hydroelectric dams. These diverse preoccupations begin to shed light on the tensions that emerged between movement participants. Chapter 3 engages these frictions while examining the unequal outlets and opportunities to partake in the Ganga’s defense that women from the rural, semi-urban, and urban

areas experienced. For my analysis, I fold the cultural politics of knowing and loving the Ganga into the political ecology of resource management. Building on this content, chapter 4 subsequently explores the frictions that emerged between mountain “insiders” and the plains-based “outsiders” who participated in the movements.

# PART II

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## POLITICAL ECOLOGY



# INTERLUDE

## A FIVE-MINUTE SONG

**J**UNE 9, 2009: An NGO known as Navdanya has organized a public event on climate change in Uttarkashi's central market. Perhaps the biggest draw is the event's main speaker, the internationally famous feminist, environmentalist, and organic food activist Dr. Vandana Shiva. She organized the meeting with her staff members and hired Uttarkashi residents to arrange the logistics. Ravi, Radhika's son, was one of the main organizers: he booked the large hall above the university library in the center of town, helped with the invitations, and was elected to serve as the master of ceremonies. Nearly all the members of the Clean the Ganga movement are in attendance, along with students, teachers, and the members of several NGOs in the district capital. About one hundred people show up, a good number for an environmental event in Uttarkashi. Awareness about climate change is growing in the region even though there is considerable disagreement about its primary forces and effects.

The high-profile speakers and upscale location notably impress the women in attendance from the Clean the Ganga movement. They are particularly pleased with the fried treats, bananas, and sweet juice that the Navdanya staff hands them. They later tell me that, in all the many years that they have attended environmental events in Uttarkashi, the climate change meeting is the first time anyone has offered them refreshments. The comment indicates their long years of dedication despite a noticeable lack of material rewards.

The first five speakers are men from Uttarkashi involved in various environmental programs. They welcome Dr. Shiva profusely and repeatedly, and they elaborate on the efforts they have made to address pollution, deforestation, and development in their part of the Himalaya. Most talk about the importance of preserving the Ganga, but one of the speakers, a poet, uses his time at the podium to denounce the dam opposition, asserting that as a scholar he knows from the scientific reports that dam building does not contribute to climate change. Dr. Shiva seems to bristle at these remarks, but she handles them diplomatically.

Radhika is one of the first female speakers to address the audience, and she is the only woman from the Clean the Ganga movement to talk at the podium. She prefaces her remarks with a homage to the Ganga, as she usually does, and then follows it with a refrain about Uttarkashi's most famous temple. She cries loudly into the microphone: "Jay Ganga Maiya! Jay Kashi Vishwanath!" Once she has everyone's attention, Radhika speaks for a brief three minutes compared to the lengthy fifteen to thirty minute speeches the men make. She, like the others, thanks Dr. Shiva (whom she refers to as her "big sister") for coming. She also asks her to help them in their efforts to protect the Ganga. "You travel the world," she says, "and you save the forests. Now please help our Ganga." Then she declares, "If we all work together, we can save Mother Ganga." Glaring at the poet who denounced the dam opposition, she continues: "We have to do good work [and] we have to do it honestly. Then we will be successful. These other people aren't doing that. They are selling off our Ganga."

When Radhika is done with these remarks, she turns to Dr. Shiva and asks if she may sing a song. Radhika beams when she gets approval and looks out into the audience while calling Nirmala up to the stage to sing with her. Nirmala shakes her head in refusal, giggling and squirming in the plastic chair on which she sits in the audience. Radhika publicly reprimands her for this, saying that it is their duty to sing for their elder sister (Dr. Shiva). Nirmala obliges. Once she reaches the podium, they begin to sing. Some of the main lines went as follows:

King Bhagirath did penance for you, Mother Ganga, penance for you  
O Mother Ganga, Queen Mother, penance for you . . .

Mother you are like cream and yogurt, cream and yogurt  
O Mother Ganga, Queen Mother, cream and yogurt . . .

Celestial Mother, you were retained in Shiva's matted locks  
Celestial Mother, retained in Shiva's matted locks . . .

Whereas Radhika's commentary lasts only a few minutes, the song goes on for at least five. The lines quoted above give a sense of the song's rhythm and flow. The main refrain—which is presented first in the above rendering—highlights the role that King Bhagirath played in bringing the river to earth. The song then reminds the audience that "Mother Ganga" fell from the heavens through Shiva's matted locks and that he kept her in his hair. Highlighting the river's journey through the world, from the mountains to the sea, the song lists all the people and places that the river blesses with its flow. It concludes with mention of Ganga Saagar, the point where the Ganga meets the Bay of Bengal near Kolkata (formerly Calcutta).

Many in the audience, including myself, have heard Radhika and Nirmala recite this song before. While some are attentive to the performance, others are not. Members of the audience converse with one another in audible tones, and some mill about. A couple of minutes into the song, someone turns on the overhead fans. The twenty-odd metallic devices buzz loudly in the auditorium making the lyrics difficult to hear. The microphone picks up this sound and amplifies it through the room along with the voices of Radhika and Nirmala. This hampers the already poor sound quality coming from the speakers. When the women are over halfway through the song, Ravi comes up to the podium and taps his mother on the shoulder to signal that she should wrap things up. She brushes him away briskly, singing on. He blushes at this public reprimand and slinks to the side of the stage. Radhika, unperturbed, continues until the words of her song safely deliver Mother Ganga to the sea.

Several more speakers take to the podium, including Dr. Shiva. Her talk focuses on some of the mechanics of climate change (with emphasis on the carbon cycle and global pollution inequities) and the need for proactive adaptation measures. Numerous others urge people to harvest water, to plant trees, and to protect the Ganga's flow. Loose plans are made for a follow-up meeting. Finally, after nearly four hours, the event concludes.

The next day, I pass an acquaintance in the streets of Uttarkashi's main market who was at the meeting. He is a friend of the family I live with outside of Uttarkashi and a documentary filmmaker who is working on a project about the Ganga's condition. "How did you like the meeting?" I ask. "It was good," he replies, "but the song was too long." I must have looked perplexed at this comment because he quickly qualifies that it was not the venue to share devotional hymns. I tease him for this, reminding him of all the music he uses to influence emotions in his films. He smiles in acknowledgment of this otherwise acceptable strategy as we part ways. As I turn in the direction of Radhika's house, I think: "After all the hours of listening to people repeat one another, he complained about a five-minute song!"



# 3

## DEFENDING THE GANGA

### Mountain Women's Activism

**O**VER THE COURSE OF MY FIELDWORK, I witnessed firsthand the impressive commitment that numerous mountain women demonstrated for the cause of defending the Ganga from dams. The presence of women in movement activities, however, did not mean that they were necessarily able to contribute substantively to the discussions and campaign planning. In the social movement processes I observed, women's utterances were occasionally heard, but their acts were often taken as performative rather than formative. The preceding interlude demonstrates the ways that some women worked to express concern for the Ganga and the dismissive reception their efforts occasionally received. While many appreciated the song that Nirmala and Radhika sang at the public event, others were not able to understand its value. The experience was not unique to the example presented; moments of misunderstanding and underappreciation punctuated several of the dam opposition events and programs.

While a few women did learn to establish themselves as spokespeople for the campaigns to oppose the dams, they were also likely to be coached by male movement leaders on how to address the media and the public, even as men commandeered their positions as the creators of a cohesive platform. In movement meetings, for instance, educated men told illiterate and semiliterate mountain women how to pepper their speeches with "environmental" knowledge and data that could add to their presentations of the personal and sociocultural dangers the dams presented. For campaign participants and leaders, such learning

moments are part and parcel of the “framing” work that social movements undertake to achieve a common and coherent platform (Benford and Snow 2000). It is often an assumption that such framing work helps reach a desired goal.<sup>1</sup> The women campaign participants were often respectful of this direction, but they also asserted their own opinions and framing suggestions in ways that were instructive.

This chapter looks at women’s involvements in several events to contest the construction of dams on the Ganga; I use these encounters to explore the ways that women’s efforts are incorporated into movement activities. While women are important to the campaigns, the examples I provide explore how women’s utterances and actions are not always given equal attention. The question then becomes: Why do women bother to share their views despite the marginalization that they sometimes received? In what follows, I provide some empirical evidence to give potential answers. Toward the end of the chapter, I turn to political ecology, and feminist political ecology in particular, to analyze the larger forces at play. Human relationships to water offer the point of focus that channels this engagement; after all, water is closely linked with gender, class, and religious identities (Truelove 2011, 143). Political ecology approaches that are sensitive to these nuances allow for the study of how everyday practice connects with water management inequities as well as social and spatial differentiation (ibid., 144).

Since this chapter explores social movement processes, an additional aim is to demonstrate how campaign participants were in dialogue with one another about the merits of their work and their diverse motivations for defending the Ganga. The events I analyze to illustrate these points include a convening of the Clean the Ganga movement and an awareness-raising campaign that involved group travel by foot (a protest tactic known in Hindi as *padyaatra*) from the mountains to New Delhi. Commentary from my main interlocutors, combined with scholarship on the relationship between gender and ecology, offers additional insight into the reasons for women’s motivations to defend the Ganga from hydro-electric dams.

## **MOVEMENT ACTORS IN UTTARKASHI: ENGAGEMENTS AND MOTIVATIONS**

To begin explaining women’s actions within the dam opposition movement(s), I start with a meeting of the Clean the Ganga movement that took place in April 2009. It was on a Sunday in the middle of that month that a group of

Uttarkashi residents gathered near the district capital's main market to plan the trip to Gangotri that I described in the interlude that precedes chapter 2. For the meeting, we convened in a recently constructed room on the rooftop of a mechanic shop that belonged to a vocal environmentalist. In addition to serving as an introduction to some of the campaign members I had not previously encountered, the meeting helped me to better understand how the contemporary movements I observed connected to past movement trajectories. I describe my experience at the meeting to share these links, to highlight the motivations that movement participants expressed, and to explore the challenges that some of the women confronted in their attempts to earn equal inclusion in movement processes.

The meeting was supposed to begin at noon; I showed up early, unaware that such meetings usually commence significantly later than the announced time. My prompt arrival meant that I had plenty of time to speak with other early arrivals, all of whom happened to be women. Nirmala was among the three who arrived on time, and we had two hours to chat before the meeting got underway. As we waited for people to trickle in, Nirmala and the other women present told me about the history of the Clean the Ganga movement. They shared with pride that, for over two decades, they had been picking up trash along the Ganga in Uttarkashi. Much of their annual work took place in the weeks before the auspicious occasion of Makar Sankranti that happens every year in the middle of January. The event marks a significant moment in the Hindu calendar and the beginning of the transition to spring. It also commemorates the day that King Bhagirath liberated his sixty thousand ancestors from the Rishi's curse by bringing the spiritually purifying Ganga down to the plains, thereby allowing them to receive salvation once their ashes were anointed with the sacred water.

For the people living along the river in the Garhwal mountains, Makar Sankranti is the most important day of the year to bathe in the Ganga. Even though it takes place in the dead of winter, people get up at 4 a.m. for a numbing full-body dip in the river before the sun rises. According to Nirmala, the efforts of the Clean the Ganga movement were first initiated to honor this event and make the act of bathing in the Ganga more enjoyable for river devotees. As she related this history, Nirmala recalled that several of the participants in the Clean the Ganga movement were previously involved in anti-liquor and anti-meat-eating campaigns. Movements against alcohol consumption were especially prominent in the 1980s, and some of the Himalayan campaigns were particularly successful (Pathak 1984, 1985).

When I tried to get a clear timeframe for these activities, I realized that the dates blurred for many of the participants. As they argued amiably over their mixed chronologies, and reminisced about their actions, we looked over photos of past events that lay on a table in the middle of the room. Many of the images showed people grinning self-consciously at the camera as they picked up trash from the riverbank in Uttarkashi city. Nirmala seemed most fond of the images; she rifled through the photos and detailed her involvement in each event. In a few of the pictures, she sat with other women from Uttarkashi. The women wore sweaters over their saris and, on top of these layers, they displayed the thick, beaded necklace called a *mangal sutra* that denotes a woman's married status.<sup>2</sup> They all had their hair parted and tied back in braids with a decorative dot (*bindi*) on the third eye region of their foreheads. In some of the photos, women such as Nirmala and Radhika were shown speaking at podiums in front of sizable crowds. In most of the images, however, they sat in the audience as men spoke.

Many of the photos featured women receiving or wearing ribbons. They reminded me of the award ribbons that students in the United States are given for winning at a science fair. When I asked about these items, Nirmala commented that they were bestowed to those active in the campaigns; they were not quite awards, but they were symbols of recognition for their hard work. Nirmala proudly commented that she has kept all her ribbons, adding that she also has numerous newspaper clippings about the events in which they have participated. We did not discuss them at the time, but our subsequent conversations about the significance attached to these items became an important point of aperture.

Our conversation was cut off when the last to arrive, the male participants, appeared around 2 p.m. By the time the meeting started, there were six or so men in attendance compared to approximately twelve women. The three middle-aged men sat on a sofa against the wall opposite the door; the younger men, all university students, sat cross-legged on the floor beside the sofa. Facing the men while also seated on the floor, the women spread out on the other side of the room in a half-circle. I tried to protest, but the male convener of the meeting insisted that my female research assistant and I sit in plastic chairs next to the sofa, elevated from the rest. This seating was awkward, and I found myself leaning forward when women spoke, trying to position myself closer to their level. The seating arrangement, while not ideal, was meant to express the group's respect for me, the foreigner who had come to study their work. The meeting's convener, whom I will call Shankar, also appeared to want my audio recorder to be closer to him so that I could capture his comments clearly.

The introduction to the meeting was long; it was mostly for my benefit since everyone else in the room knew the details he shared. But Shankar's mini-speech was also revealing. Like most of the other people in the room, he was a first-generation resident of Uttarkashi. Whereas many of the women in the campaigns had moved to Uttarkashi after marriage (following the careers of their husbands), Shankar arrived alone in 1982 of his own accord. By that time, several new roads made travel up from the base of the mountains convenient. Although there were likely economic motivations for his move, Shankar stressed the location's religious importance when explaining what brought him to Uttarkashi. "This area is (Shiva's) Kashi," he stated, before elaborating on the prominent events that took place in Uttarkashi over the centuries. For instance, he itemized Parsu Ram (a character from the Hindu epic, the *Ramayana*) who did penance here. Lord Shiva once fought demons in Uttarkashi, and his weapon (a trident or *trishul*) is still on display in the Shiv Vishwanath Mandir, the town's main temple. Each year, because of Uttarkashi's importance, he added, people come from all around the region to do a five-mile circumambulation of the main religious sites.<sup>3</sup>

Considering Uttarkashi's significance, Shankar continued, he and others have been working to protect the historic city since the late 1980s. Their efforts began with planting trees; they added thousands of trees to the hillsides above and around Uttarkashi. Importantly, they did not plant the rampantly proliferating pine trees that one sees all over the mountains.<sup>4</sup> Their plantations included trees such as cedar, oak, and eucalyptus (in moderation). These forestation measures overlapped with the river cleaning events. For this work, no individual received any compensation; rather, he insisted, everyone chips in what they can—ten to twenty rupees per month (less than fifty cents in United States dollars)—to support the programming. "Why?" he asked rhetorically. Because, he explained, Uttarkashi is at the center of the region's sacred geography. Propelled by their faith (*aastha*) and religiously charged emotion (*bhaavana*), devotees of Ganga and Shiva come from all over the world to worship here. If the region is unclean, then their devotional acts will be compromised by the degradation. That is why, he cautioned, it is important to keep Ganga and the environment pure (*swacch*). It is for this reason that, in addition to the river cleaning activities, they also campaign against animal slaughter and meat-eating, which are offenses in many North Indian understandings of Hindu conduct (as opposed to elsewhere, such as in Nepal, where meat eating is not always considered to be ritually polluting).

Shankar elaborated on the dangers of allowing such impure activities to take place by describing the shock of Hindus who travel to the region:

When people come here and see that there is a dead goat and dead chickens hanging about, then you can imagine what people might feel . . . And when you enter [into Uttarkashi's main market], you can see taverns and alcohol shops. So the person that comes with great faith will see this . . . He will see that blood from the butcher shops goes into the Ganga and then finds its way to the Shiv Vishwanath Mandir [when people offer water sourced from the riverbank] . . . Seeing this, his faith will be broken. [Concerned by this,] we sought to correct this situation and make the environment pure.

In the campaign's awareness-raising and environmental-purification efforts, Shankar acknowledged that ten to fifteen women from Uttarkashi have served as key contributors. When saying this, he pointed to two of the women present: Nirmala and Radhika. Offering them praise, he stated that they had been some of the most devoted participants. Because of their collective work, he proclaimed proudly, their first success was in forcing the municipality to close some of the butcher shops near the river. Inspired by this initial victory, the group decided to clean the Ganga in the days before Makar Sankranti. After all, Shankar reminded us, the village women come to Uttarkashi on that day, and they bathe at Manikarnika ghat to purify themselves. The goal was to provide a clean space for them to worship and to elevate the purity of their prayers.

As it turned out, the campaign was sometimes difficult to coordinate, and the numbers of attendees could be lower than expected. That is why efforts were made to explain the significance of their river cleaning programs to the public and to get people to think beyond the petty disagreements that could get in the way of fostering collective action. Speaking of his efforts to unite people around the cause, Shankar recalled how he requested that everyone he knew join the campaign. He recalled saying, "Our faith in Ganga is the same, [so] why don't we work together? . . . Ganga is a Mother for everyone and this is a religious site." The call urged collective action around an agent and a location of common devotion, and it encouraged people to focus on their *dharmic* responsibility as Hindus to pursue right conduct. This rationale echoed the tactics of other Indian social movements that mobilize around shared identities to address issues of common concern (Rangan 2000b, 159).

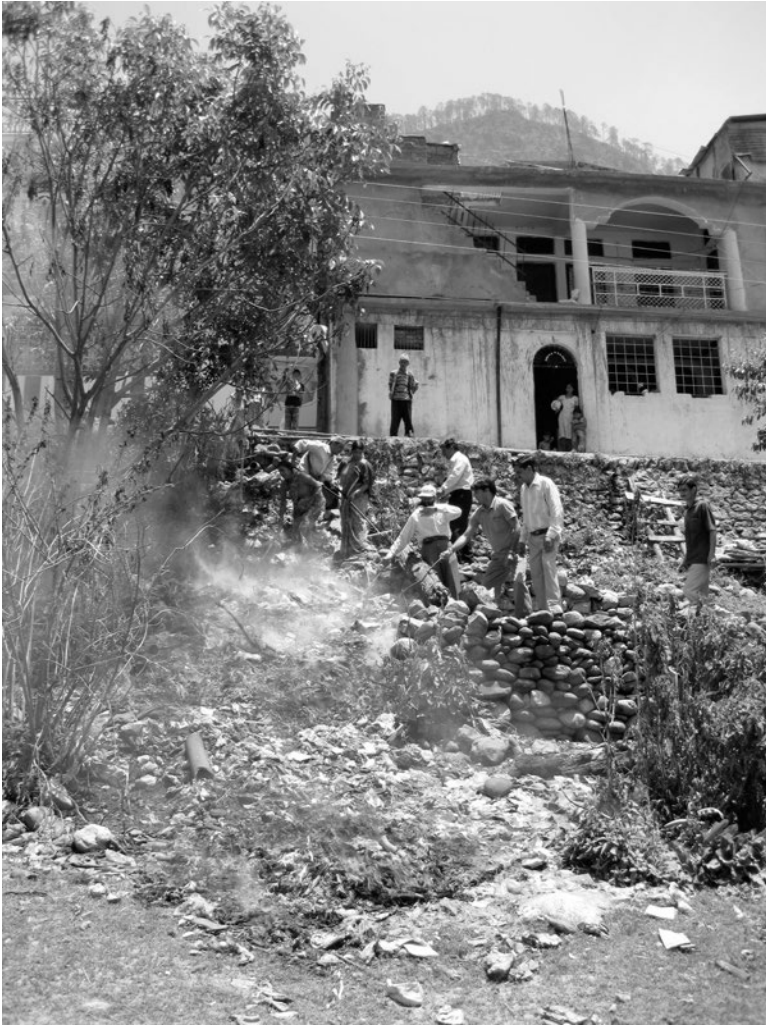


FIGURE 10. A Riverside Cleanup Effort by Members of the Clean the Ganga Movement



When Shankar commented that they all needed to do this work, “without concern for politics,” everyone in the room agreed. The mention of politics, however, got people talking about the dams being constructed along the Bhagirathi Ganga. A polyphony of voices arose:

RAVI: They shouldn’t do this [build the dams] . . . People come here from all over the world like our sister Gina [Georgina]. Everyone is worried about the Ganga.

NIRMALA: [With all those dams] the Ganga will be lost in the tunnels. Then who will come here? There will be no one in the hotels. Where will people get their daily bread (*roz ki roti*)?

RADHIKA: We want *all* of Ganga’s flow. We don’t want a mere trickle!

Shankar tried to reign in the flurry of grievances that these statements ignited. In that effort, he steered people toward planning the upcoming trip to Gangotri to document the damage caused by the dam building and to raise awareness of the Ganga’s plight by cleaning the river’s banks at Gangotri. The men in attendance primarily led the discussion of how to organize the program and the public-relations opportunities that they envisioned would result. This included plans to announce the trip in the press and create a documentary video of the campaign.

As the planning continued, the women in attendance tried to interject suggestions. Sometimes their ideas were acknowledged, but other times their comments were ignored. In many instances, they had to shout to be heard. Some of these voices sounded aggressive, but they were effective in gaining attention. The women who were unwilling to shout, by contrast, were unable to project their comments into the room; only in a few instances were the more self-assured women able to loudly demand that the group listen to these soft-spoken utterances. When they achieved this, it was often to the gentler woman’s dismay. One woman looked deeply embarrassed after someone by her side succeeded in getting everyone’s attention so that her point could be made. She cast her head downward as she repeated her idea, rendering her speech barely audible. A quick succession of more boisterous comments filled the room.

Although Shankar had acknowledged Nirmala and Radhika as important participants in the movement, even these two women had to shout to make their comments heard. They were more successful than the other women, but even they had a difficult time getting the group to listen to a song they wanted to sing



at the next big event. Shankar told them they could save it for later, but they persisted. When they extracted his reluctant permission, they broke into an elaborate rendition that sang the Ganga's praises. The song—which I partially featured in the interlude to this chapter—emphasized the river's creation story, its saving grace, and its role in the sacred Himalaya. At times, the women faltered in their recollection of the lyrics. Each time, Shankar prematurely cut in to thank them, in the hopes they would stop singing. They continued, determined to share the melody they had composed. After a few minutes, he and the other men lost interest and they began to make phone calls on their cell phones as the women sang in front of them. When the singing made their conversations hard to follow, the men shouted over the noise. They looked relieved when the song was finished, but they praised it all the same.

## WHAT MOTIVATES WOMEN'S ACTIVISM?

At first, it was difficult to identify the many reasons why the women I met in Uttarkashi were so committed to the meetings and campaigns described. To understand their motivations, I conducted dozens of semistructured interviews with women involved in the river cleaning and dam opposition campaigns. I also recorded ten life histories of women active in the movements. I compared these interviews and personal stories with the similarly extensive conversations, interviews, and life histories that I documented of the men involved in the campaigns. Based on my exchanges with the women, it appears that their involvement in the movements in and around Uttarkashi was not explicitly motivated by demands for the “right to speak” that can motivate women's participation in social movements in other locations such as Latin America (Stephen 2011; see also Weldon 2006). Although women complained that men did not take their suggestions seriously, they often reasoned that this was because they had relatively less education. At times, they even seemed to appreciate the guidance.

As a woman with advanced degrees in higher education, it was initially challenging for me to comprehend the full scope of women's insecurities around literacy, and how this impacted the parameters of women's movement involvements. It took me several months to begin to understand the discomfort and stigma that illiteracy or even semiliteracy entailed. I watched as women made self-deprecating remarks about their abilities and avoided anything related to reading or writing in public. This initial inability to comprehend the extent of

their struggles reflected my own privilege. As I reflected on what I would do in their position, I was continually humbled by these women's extensive campaign efforts. I was also reminded of the introspection that other scholars working in South Asia have undergone to address their complicity in social hierarchies while undertaking feminist ethnographies (Abu-Lughod 1993; Behar 1994; Davies 2007; Holland and Skinner 1995; Visweswaran 1997). For example, Elizabeth Enslin (1994), working in the context of rural Nepal, has pointed out that "well-meaning Nepali and Western elites who work in rural development programs have been calling rural people, especially women, ignorant for at least forty years" (553). As a result, rural women of various ethnic groups and castes have internalized popular views of themselves as "backwards" and "ignorant." Considering this, Enslin argues that feminist ethnography is a way to employ accountability in the various locations of cultural, economic, and political difference that anthropologists and feminist anthropologists engage. "This," she clarifies, "means a reordering of our ethical and political responsibilities and a redistribution of the benefits of knowledge" (*ibid.*, 551). These were all challenges, and calls to action, to which I felt a deep sense of obligation.

## **IN EVERY MOVEMENT, A MAJORITY: TALES AND HYPOTHESES OF WOMEN'S ACTIVISM**

During the period of my research in Uttarkashi, I asked nearly everyone I spoke with why they thought women were so devoted to the Ganga and so involved in efforts to address its management. In response to these queries, I encountered a variety of responses. Many people, particularly men, gave brief answers citing women's "natural" affinity with the river. As one male NGO employee asserted, women are more "emotionally involved with the river and the ceremonial part of the Hindu religion." My female interlocutors were apt to summarize the reasons for their involvement by stating, "Because women are strong!" They often added, as if it was self-explanatory, that the river is a mother. The Ganga's association with motherhood meant that she must be defended at all costs.<sup>5</sup> At the very least, these explanations demonstrated a basic understanding that gender plays a role in influencing people's perceptions and motivations for movement participation. As standalone answers, however, they were incomplete. Additional moments of exchange and encounter were needed to add further clarity to the range of motivations that women held.

A campaign that further highlighted women's commitment to the Ganga took place in February 2008, several months before my research began. It entailed a march from the glacial source of the river to New Delhi. From the anecdotes I gathered, a prominent Hindu storyteller (*kathaawaala*) led the rally to protect the sanctity of Hindu spiritual practices dependent on accessing the Ganga's waters. With a following of mostly women, he took a procession of some five thousand people on a three-week journey by foot to protest the dams. This campaign loomed large in the minds of many of my interlocutors when I began full-time research, and so I asked for additional commentary from as many people as possible. In some recollections of that campaign, I was told that women abandoned their fields and homes as the march passed and that they walked with provisions of wheat and homegrown rice tied to their backs or tucked into their saris. The descriptions of hardship and perseverance underscored women's devotion to the cause of protecting the Ganga.

Later, when I met with the procession's leader, I asked why he thought so many women were involved. The answer seemed obvious to him, but he obliged me with an explanation of how the river's essential elements (*tattva*) transfer to the women who reside along its banks. "They live by the Ganga," he said. "When the air blows over it and touches them, they emotionally become just like the Ganga. They are connected. In each and every fiber; in their blood; and in every pore." Because of this, he concluded, "there is no difference between them and the Ganga." Perplexed by the implications of such an argument, I inquired what this had to do with women's activism. Amused by my lack of understanding, he repeated that women are one with the river and that they therefore see their own death in its demise. "That is natural," he added, "this is their love." Although the response initially struck me as essentialist, I later concluded that it was not entirely so. The storyteller at least pointed in the direction of women's placement in a region where many rural women (unlike most men) live their whole lives in a restricted area, moving only between select villages and forests. This suggested a gendered "politics of place" (Escobar and Harcourt 2005). He also acknowledged that women are concerned because they observe and learn from their experiences with the river; this gives them understandings of the impact the Ganga's redirected flow could have on livelihoods and ecological integrity.

After witnessing numerous instances of devotion to the river and documenting statements of emotion and care for its waters, I began to understand the degree to which everyday practice, along with enduring struggles and socioeconomic considerations, influenced gendered relationships and concerns for the

Bhagirathi Ganga. Although this insight could be supported by a social practice theory approach (Bourdieu 1977; Holland and Lave 2001, 2009), as well as by strains of political ecology that draw from feminist and practice theories to address agency (Biersack 2006, 5), the ethnographic data was initially more confusing than it was illuminating. It took long months of observation, conversation, life-history interviews, and literature review to understand the dynamics at play. Each of these sources had to be weighed against others to avoid overgeneralizations or inaccuracies. This was especially true of the ethnographic encounters.

## RAVI AND RADHIKA ON GENDERED MOVEMENT INVOLVEMENTS

A conversation in February 2009 helps to illuminate the difficulty of identifying women's motivations for participating in movement activity. The exchange took place at a time when I was still forming relationships with women and other activists in Uttarkashi. The meeting occurred in Radhika's two-bedroom home and, since it was my first visit to Radhika's house, our conversation was accompanied with the formality of tea and snacks, the consumption of which signaled mutual respect. For the interview, I was joined by a friend and former coworker who wanted to help me to "get the facts" about the potential impacts of dam building so that he, and perhaps his NGO, could get involved in stopping the projects.

In a pause between sips of sweet milk tea, I asked in Hindi about the movement activities of which I had heard rumors. I was curious to learn of Radhika's and her family's views on the march to New Delhi. Did they concur that most participants were women? And did they share the argument I heard that women's intimate relationships with the river inspire their activism? While they agreed that women constituted much of the procession, and that they are very attached to the Ganga, they also added their own hypotheses.

The first to speak was Ravi. "Sister," he offered, "in Uttarakhand women have played an important role in every successful movement . . . Whatever movements have taken place here, like when Uttarakhand became a state, the maximum number—90 percent—of supporters were women." Nodding her head, Radhika, exclaimed, "We women!" while thumping her chest in pride. Encouraged, Ravi repeated the percentage of involvement while adding that they persisted even when subjected to violence. "Now also, if there is anyone with us,

then it is mostly women.” When pressed to explain this, he speculated that the mountain women view the opposition efforts as morally righteous or, in his words, part of “God’s work” (*bhagwaan ka kaam*). Radhika agreed. “Tell her this,” she suggested, “the women here are simple<sup>6</sup> . . . they have little reading and writing skills but they respect what their gurus (religious teachers) say.” In the opinion of Radhika and her son, in other words, women are following what they believe (and are taught to believe) is right action, also known as dharma, in the Hindu religion.<sup>7</sup>

Interpreting Radhika’s words, my friend commented that the women involved in the dam opposition “are following their religion,” before inserting his own opinion. Offering that the mountain women are very “honest” and that they “listen to their hearts,” he contrasted female integrity with his observations of male misbehavior, gleaned from growing up and doing research extensively in Uttarakhand (and Garhwal, in particular). Referring to his past efforts to get villagers involved in sustainable craft industries and organic agriculture initiatives, he explained that Garhwali men are often unmotivated because of alcohol consumption: “In the morning they talk about work and in the evening, they drink wine and they forget about things. That is why we got all successness [*sic*] because of women.” Following this comment, the discussion drifted into a tirade against male alcoholism and lassitude.

The varied perspectives illustrate several tensions. Although there is agreement on the historical precedents of women’s activism, their high involvement in previous efforts was cited as a reason for their dam activism in and of itself. Women, in other words, were acting because they had been active before. Even when additional points were offered, the logic was imprecise. These answers were not restricted to my informants and, as I show below, scholars are still debating about the gendered dimensions of environmental activism.

The limitation of these positions, from my perspective, is that they fail to account for the motivations that drove women’s involvement in other movements such as Chipko and the campaign for the independent state of Uttarakhand. Although there may have been religious currents in those efforts, they were not driven explicitly by concerns of Hindu cultural heritage or cosmological balance, as can be the case with the defense of the Ganga. For others, like my NGO friend, women’s activism is a counter to what he perceived to be a pressing social ill in the region—male alcoholism. Whereas his experiences may have sensitized him to the problems that result from alcohol consumption, this explanation did not engage the range of men’s practice, including the fact that many

(but certainly not all) mountain men work as hard as women in the fields, in day labor, and in social movements. To better understand the particularities of women's participation in dam opposition, and to address gendered difference in movement practice, I next elaborate on the precedents on which their activism builds.

## **WOMEN'S ACTIVISM IN THE GARHWAL HIMALAYA: AN OVERVIEW**

Discussions of environmental activism in Garhwal often make people think of the Chipko Andolan (henceforth Chipko). The now-famous effort to resist commercial logging began with a well-cited, perhaps legendary, encounter in 1974 when women defended the forests from felling by clinging to trees while the village men were away in a distant location (Chamoli). A confrontation ensued, and one drunken laborer threatened a female leader, Gaura Devi, with a gun. "In response," Martin Haigh recounts, "she bared her breast and challenged him to fire: 'Shoot and then only you can cut this forest which is like a mother to us'" (1988, 101). Deterred, the male laborers left the site, and the Chipko movement began. The movement lasted into the 1980s when countermovements formed to oppose post-Chipko policies of forest "protection."<sup>8</sup>

Since the first encounter (and the ones that ensued), much has been written on Chipko. In the scholarship, there is a lack of consensus on the gender dynamics, the motivations of villagers, and the politics behind the movement (Bandyopadhyay 1992, 1999; Mawdsley 1998; Somen 1999). For Haigh (1988), it was a people's movement that played an important role in women's emancipation. To Vandana Shiva (1988, 1993), the Chipko was a women's movement in defense of a feminine nature whose productivity and creativity is subject to control by patriarchal society. Such arguments helped to support the "ecofeminist" approach that, in its more cultural strains, draws parallels between the exploitation of women's bodies and the destruction of nature. For Guha (1989), Chipko was a peasant movement that built on anticolonial resistance; he notes, however, that women have always played an important part in rural life and that this historic level of participation can help explain their involvement in contemporary social movements.

Demystifying what she considers the "myths" of Chipko and other tales about life in the Himalaya, Rangan (2000a) argues that villagers (men and

women) insisted on regional rights and discretion in the use of forest resources. Antje Linkenbach (2007) holds a similar view and provides an in-depth examination of why and how villagers came to feel betrayed by those who used the movement's fame for their own personal gain. Despite disagreements over the impetus for the Chipko movement and the extent and significance of women's roles, each of these accounts acknowledge that women were highly involved. In part because of their significant participation in Chipko and other movements, Shubhra Gururani (2014) argues that the women of the region became more active "political agents" who made connections "between their marginalization, poverty, underdevelopment, and the apathy and greed of the state" (73). As I discuss in chapter 4, the realizations that women developed could include observations of how others have benefitted from their ideas and actions while they gained little by comparison.

Almost two decades after the first Chipko campaign, the effort to break away from the state of Uttar Pradesh and its capital in the Indian plains again saw the similarly high participation of mountain women. In the campaigns for an independent state, however, the stakes and the number of agitators were greater than previous movements. Gaining momentum in the mid-1990s, the desire to form an independent, mountain-centric state of Uttarakhand unified a wide demographic of people in the regions of Garhwal and Kumaon. Movement participation grew when mass agitations arose in response to a state decree (following recommendations of the Mandal Commission) expanding the number of reservations for Other Backward Castes, Scheduled Castes, and Scheduled Tribes (the equivalent of affirmative action). In the predominantly upper-caste mountain regions where unemployment rates are high, this triggered numerous protests that coalesced into a large-scale movement (Mawdsley 1997, 2224).<sup>9</sup> Gururani (2014) explains more of the backstory, while clarifying that although the movement was "certainly casteist . . . it was not directed against the lower castes" (74):

Since the OBCs (Other Backward Castes) in Uttarakhand constitute only 2% of the total population of the state, it was widely felt that if the recommendations of the Mandal Commission were to be implemented, given that quotas for scheduled castes and tribes were already in place, (then) just under half of all government jobs and slots in educational institutions would be reserved for Scheduled Castes, Tribes, and OBCs. To fill those reserved spots, (it was feared that) OBCs from the plains of Uttar Pradesh would migrate to the hill region to take scarce

jobs. It was in this context, faced with chronic unemployment, that angry students from several college campuses came out in large numbers and organized their first strike on 31 July 1994. (*ibid.*, 73)

When the agitations expanded in scope, the separate state movement began to include preexisting concerns for the environment and for women's rights. The latter entailed appeals to check the sale of alcohol that is often bought with limited household finances by men, to the detriment of women's health and child nutrition. Beyond these issues, Emma Mawdsley (1997) asserts that a deep-seated point of contention was the perception of "internal colonialism." The sentiment was fueled by legacies of rampant resource extraction, along with hostility toward the long-standing tendency to rule the affairs of the mountains from the distant Indian plains. These outsiders were viewed negatively for their lack of understanding and indifference toward the needs of the mountain people.<sup>10</sup> As I explain in chapter 4, this hostility continues to influence movement processes in the early twenty-first century.

As the Uttarakhand State movement progressed, so did the involvement of mountain women. According to Radha Behn, a Gandhian activist who was part of the campaign, many of the female agitators showed exceptional determination. At times when men had abandoned sites of opposition, she recalled, women persisted in their resolve to sit in protest. Citing this along with other efforts in Garhwal to oppose mining and the Tehri dam, she observed: "Women had a very great involvement . . . Everywhere the women were in the forefront." These comments were shared during an interview with her on a cold night at the Gandhi Peace Foundation in December 2009. Like other experts I spoke to, she did not identify caste or class differences among the women who joined the campaigns. She did indicate, however, that many of the women who joined the campaigns were from economically struggling households. Radha Behn further indicated that the women involved were mostly illiterate or semiliterate. As she explained, "The educated women think of rules and regulations and about the consequences of their actions like getting arrested. But the farmer women who work in the fields and forests, they think only that the forests and land should survive and be saved."

Mawdsley's research concurs with the observation that women, and potentially low income women, were highly involved in the Uttarakhand State movement. In a separate article on the role of women in that movement, she writes that women played a part at every level: their activities included formulating,



leading, and participating in the protests and demonstrations; contributing to its ideological strength and direction(s); and acting as a point of resistance (Mawdsley 2000). This work was undertaken despite the hardships involved. The significant contributions made by women added to the numerous physical and time constraints that women in Garhwal face as the main domestic and agricultural laborers. Their efforts also put their personal safety at risk, a factor that weighed on women and their families.

In 2000, after years of struggle, Uttarakhand gained independence from Uttar Pradesh. Some Garhwal residents contend that, since its formation, the government has improved infrastructure, including roads, schools, and hospitals. Working on the other side of the mountain in Kumaon, by contrast, Shubhra Gururani contends that in the aftermath of the Uttarakhand State movement there is a “despondency among rural residents” that “not much has changed” since a new state was created (2014, 75). One of her interlocutors, Janaki Devi, shared a heart rendering lament: “There are no jobs for our sons in the plains or here, we are actually worse, still sitting with our hands spread out for water, for fuel, for medicines, for hospitals, for everything . . . Now we don’t matter to the politicians, we lost out” (ibid., 76). In both Garhwal and Kumaon, a common lament is that many policies remain driven by elite forces focused on the provision of goods and services for urban centers downstream. In the case that I studied, this included complaints about how the dams on the Ganga were decided on (as well as how the Eco-Zone would later be formulated).

While this historical background is illuminating, there is another point of concern to investigate: the question of distinction between and among the women who are involved in social movements. I turn to this next, before amplifying the conceptual discussion.

## **GENDER, PRACTICE, AND ACTIVISM ON THE GANGA**

In discussing gendered practice, the examination of socioeconomic standing and difference are crucial. This heeds the call by Aradhana Sharma (2008) to address the minutiae of women’s agency to better contextualize the micropolitics of resistance (see also Sen and Majumder 2015). In the case of the dam oppositions I observed in Garhwal, it was no coincidence that the core group of women activists all lived in Uttarkashi, the district capital. Although many of them came from village backgrounds, they enjoyed much more leisure time than the women

of nearby rural areas. While they were often busy with domestic affairs and even some agricultural duties, their semi-urban location allowed them to attend more meetings and rallies than the village women because the district capital was often a gathering point.

In addition to geographic location, personal factors were also likely to influence the amount of activism in which Uttarkashi-based women engaged. Almost all the lead activists were middle-aged women with supportive husbands. Although the topic of caste was difficult to broach, I found that most of my main interlocutors had last names that located them within the Kshatriya and Brahmin groups. This means that they were upper caste. Even though they met at one another's houses from time to time, and appeared to get along well, caste observances were occasionally apparent. Some of the women in Uttarkashi, for instance, abstained from taking food in the homes of people that they identified as belonging to a lower subcaste respective to their own. As such topics were difficult to discuss, and since I did not want to amplify tensions within the movements, I often abstained from asking pointed questions about caste.

Although most of the main women activists were in Uttarkashi, the demographic base of support for rallies and demonstrations came from women living in villages along or near to the flow of the Bhagirathi Ganga. For many such women, frequent travel to minor meetings and movement events was not feasible. While local transportation is affordable by living standards outside of the mountains, it is difficult for many women to regularly find between 20 and 40 Indian rupees (less than one United States dollar) for a roundtrip ticket to Uttarkashi (let alone to other locations). Time was perhaps an even larger constraint since movement along winding mountain roads involves too many delays for women who have busy daily schedules from early morning until late at night. Many village women over the age of thirty, for instance, must collect fodder and then wood from the forests, cook at least two meals per day for their families, tend to livestock, sell milk to local markets if any surplus is available, and tend to agricultural fields. When the opportunity presents itself, they also engage in irregular labor for the National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme. This routine means that nearly every minute of a village woman's day is often preoccupied with the daily tasks of living and livelihood. While many of these activities can be enjoyable, such as the act of collecting fodder that gives women time to socialize when it is done in groups (Dyson 2010), most of their daily tasks are physically demanding. Out of concern for the Ganga's well-being, however, numerous village women did mobilize for the larger campaign events.

In some cases, bus transportation was arranged by other movement participants or by ashrams invested in stopping the dams. In other cases, women paid out of their own pockets and sacrificed precious time in their fields to oppose the river's obstruction and manipulation.

In addition to impacting movement involvement, women's different socioeconomic and geographic locations influenced the kind of concerns they had for development along the Ganga. When Radhika said that illiterate women follow the teachings of their Hindu religious leaders, she was indirectly pointing out her position in society and the pastimes available to her. For, although Radhika comes from a village and remembers the hardships of rural life, her location in a semi-urban area influences her daily practice. A religiously devout woman who no longer must engage in agricultural labor, she spends a good portion of her free time gathering with other women to recite devotional songs and to listen to the Hindu epics told by storytellers. As noted in chapter 2, these devotional practices position the Ganga as an entity of paramount importance for Hindu cultural and spiritual lives, thereby underscoring its significance and the duty of river devotees to act in the river's defense.

Added to these practices are the outlets of personal expression and the experiences of intersubjectivity that the Ganga enables. In a landscape devoid of the therapists common to modern psychology, the Ganga serves as a receptacle for human emotion; when praying near her flowing waters, women feel that the goddess listens, receives, and transmits their concerns and desires. Almost every woman with whom I spoke in the dam opposition movements, in fact, had at least one example of a transformative moment along the river's banks, including encounters when the goddess Ganga removed fears, worry, or physical pain. These experiences demonstrate the ways in which the Ganga infuses life with meaning while being subject to human practices of meaning making. This observation recalls Roy Rappaport's comment, repeated by Biersack, that ecology studies must account for "the complex dynamic" between meaning making and action (2006, 7–8). The symbiotic relationship that women have with the Ganga, to state the point in different terms, further helps to foster connection with, and concern for, the river.

While village women sometimes do find time to listen to Hindu storytellers, and while they also turn to the river goddess for solace and emotional strength, their concerns for the river are more often fostered through direct observation of the changes to its flow and experiences of growing water stress in the region. Although Uttarkashi enjoys the river's constant (although highly variable) flow

(as well as water that comes from municipal taps), preexisting upstream projects and drying springs give village women a more visceral experience of the potential livelihood disruptions that new dams could entail.

When asked about the dams, Lakshmi, who lives upstream of Uttarkashi, highlighted livelihood issues and the need for equitable development before expanding on the cultural-religious implications. Although she affirmed that hydroelectric projects do entail development (*vikaas*), she qualified this by saying, "It is the kind of development that harms us tenfold." In explanation, she listed the damage, or *vinaash*, caused by the dam building that was already underway: blasting, messy road construction, deforestation, landslides, and disappearing springs. This damage was making life even more difficult for people, and women in particular, because it reduced the availability of, and access to, vital supplies of water and timber.

Lakshmi further asserted that the redirection of water out of the riverbed has nonmaterial implications that tie into the livelihood challenges. Reflecting on the river's significance as the "greatest cultural heritage" for mountain people, she lamented the potential interruption of important rites of passage in the Hindu life-cycle (*sanskaar*) that residents could face if the flow was reduced. The need to ritually access the waters is especially important for women, as being a good mother and wife entails periodic fasting, prayer, and worship for familial well-being. This type of fasting, which is part of a practice of voluntary ritual undertakings known as *vrata*, is available to men but it tends to be more popular among women, especially those with limited access to scriptures and Vedic rituals (Glücklich 2008, 139). For women in Garhwal, it is contact with the flowing Ganga that ideally marks the culmination of such rites. When ending *vrata* in this way, the Ganga helps women fulfill their ritual and familial obligations. It is a type of symbolic sacrifice that the Ganga sanctifies.<sup>11</sup>

Underlying the discussion of costs and benefits is the ever-present issue of the political-economic context in which the Ganga's flow matters for women. The politics of economy are not abstract but can be felt on the body because, according to Lakshmi, the continuity of livelihoods depends on the strength of mountain women. To this, another female friend, who was listening to one of our conversations, interjected and added: "Women do all the work . . . Men just eat their fill and rest." Stressing that the Garhwali men do not have "wisdom" and that few understand how hard life is for village women, she argued that women feel the region's pain (*kshetra ka dard*) and are motivated to defend it, their sacred land (*dev bhoomi*), from harm. It is not easy to do so, she qualified,

because women are already overburdened and they can only join movements after attending to their many chores. Pointing to me, the woman even pondered aloud what a nice life I must have without all of the obligations and duties that Garhwali women must fulfill. “You just study and travel,” she observed. “Your life is totally carefree.”

## THE BACKBONE HYPOTHESIS

The idea that rural women do all the work became a theme in my fieldwork, one that I coded as the “backbone hypothesis” because so many people referred to Garhwali woman as the region’s biggest strength. This idea arose in numerous conversations as well as in the literature; if they did not use the English word *backbone*, people employed its Hindi equivalent, *reedh ki haddi*. This terminology was sometimes used to praise village women, sometimes used to lament the arduous conditions that define their everyday lives, and sometimes used to position women’s contributions against those made by men. In their more exasperated moments, some women echoed the idea that they were undergoing penance.<sup>12</sup> In other moments—often ones of repose—they would ponder their achievements. “If it weren’t for us, nothing would get done here,” said one villager while taking a tea break between chores at her home. Tapping on her forearm for emphasis, she pronounced that the women of Garhwal have bones made of iron.

When men are not being portrayed as less productive vis-à-vis women, they are often situated as more thoroughly integrated into the cash economy than women; this integration has historical precedents. The balance of domestic and agricultural workloads began to tip toward women by at least the nineteenth century when state and British armies drew heavily from the male population of Garhwal to build their armed forces. This conscription forced men to leave their villages to earn wages during their productive years, leading to the “intense participation of females” in agriculture (Rawat 2002, 299). The memoirs of a former officer posted in Uttarkashi show that the gender imbalance persisted into the latter half of the twentieth century:

The hill women are the backbone of this agricultural economy . . . Their day begins with grinding flour, fetching water from the village spring, husking rice, milking cows, collecting fuel and fodder, cooking meals, tending cattle, and rearing



FIGURE 11. Garhwali Women Threshing Rice

children. They attend to various agriculture operations like sowing, weeding, hoeing, paddy transplantation, harvesting, threshing, and winnowing. Males just do the ploughing and some other work like mending the irrigation channels or keeping watch over the harvest . . . [the] migration of males adds to the workload and responsibility of the women. (Kuksal 2007, 252–53)

This commentary held up to my observations. In some ways, life seemed even harder for women since expectations and responsibilities are shifting: whereas village women were previously assisted with chores by their children, in many areas, parents now prioritize education for their sons—and increasingly their daughters—so that they can secure office and administrative jobs later in life.

Although some label the age and gender imbalance in the rural landscape “the feminization of agriculture” (Kelkar 2010), it is important to recognize that men can also suffer. Since earning cash is frequently considered to be part of men’s responsibility and it is often not viable to do so through agricultural production, some must leave their families for long periods to earn money for household needs and to pay the fees associated with a child’s education.

Not surprisingly, the pressure to earn income can limit men’s involvement in movement activity. As one villager summarized the situation when speaking in a focus group on the topic, “Men don’t come [to the movement events] because there is a problem of employment . . . Sure, not everyone gets jobs from the dams, but there is hope.” The man further reasoned that, since the “men’s work” of ploughing only takes a few weeks, the prospect of earning extra income with the dam company is attractive. He asserted, however, that even though the men might not be as visible in the movements, many do encourage the women activists because “everyone wants to see Gangaji flowing.”

Although I did observe women defying their families to join movement events, it is true that men can be supportive of women’s participation. In one village, I met three women who traveled to New Delhi in 2009—most of them for the first time—to join a dam opposition meeting organized by NGOs. The women spoke of the difficulties they encountered in attending the convention but noted that their families had given them permission. Looking pointedly from my female assistant to me, they explained that this was necessary because they do not enjoy as much freedom as women elsewhere. Elaborating on the theme of gender, one woman shared that two of her sons encouraged her involvement despite their employment in the dam construction. In reference to her activism, she recalled that they said, “Go and fight, Mom. What is the company giving, anyway? It will leave after a few days. We want permanent jobs.”

## **THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN GENDER AND THE ENVIRONMENT: SCHOLARLY ANALYSES**

The preceding data, in addition to summarizing women’s long-standing participation in the social movements of Garhwal, underscores the ongoing struggle for mountain-centric development. The fight is waged by women and men alike but to differing degrees. This differing participation is a result of distinct

everyday practice, which is influenced by cultural, religious, and socioeconomic considerations, as well as the politics of ecology. Such assertions build on previous scholarship, some of which draws on Himalayan movement histories.

In the early 1990s, Bina Agarwal wrote about “feminist environmentalism,” helping to advance the discussion of gender and the environment and move beyond some of the ecofeminist quagmires.<sup>13</sup> Drawing on the practice and commentary of Himalayan women, Bina Agarwal joined many others in rejecting the idea that men and women have predetermined relationships with nature. People’s understandings of the environment, she suggested, are best approximated by examining different levels of access to, and dependence on, natural resources because knowledge of nature is experiential. In her formulation, gender and class (including caste/race) are important because they influence the distribution of labor, property, and power. These factors shape the experience–knowledge interface and responses to environmental challenges (B. Agarwal 1994b). She explains her stance in speaking of women’s movement involvement:

In emphasizing the role of poor peasant and tribal women in ecology movements, I am not arguing, as do some feminist scholars, that women possess a specifically feminine sensibility or cognitive temperament, or that women qua women have certain traits that predispose them to attend to particulars, to be interactive rather than individualist, and to understand the true character of complex natural processes in holistic terms . . . Rather, I locate the perspective of poor tribal and peasant women (perspectives which are often holistic and interactive) in their material reality—in their dependence on and actual use of natural resources for survival, the knowledge of nature gained in that process, and the broader cultural parameters which define people’s activities and modes of thinking in their communities. (B. Agarwal 1994b, 348–49)

Several scholars built on the political economy aspects of Bina Agarwal’s feminist arguments; notable in this discussion are the contributions from the field of feminist political ecology. In the introduction to an edited volume that elaborated on the approach, Diane Rocheleau, Barbara Thomas-Slayter, and Esther Wangari (1996) argue that there are *real* (as opposed to imagined) gender differences in the experience of, responsibilities for, and interests in “nature” and environments but that those differences are not necessarily rooted in biology. Rather, they argue, they derive from the social interpretation of biology



and social constructs of gender that vary by culture, class, race, and place and are subject to individual and social change (1996, 3). Their formulation draws on feminist influences in cultural ecology, political ecology, political economy, and geography to understand and interpret place-based experience(s) in the context of global environmental and economic change. The latter emphasis resonates with recent arguments that examine the nuances of human agency within “reimagined” formulations of political ecology (Biersack 2006, 5). At the same time, they interrogate the impact of inequitable and environmentally destructive economic systems as they move across scales in what is termed “global political ecology” (Peet, Robbins, and Watts 2011). Collectively, these approaches are provocative for thinking about women’s activism in Garhwal because they acknowledge that, although there are several axes of power that define access to resources and environmental sensibilities, gender is an extremely important factor that warrants attention.

However, there are some who disagree with this approach. Arun Agrawal’s (2005) work on environmentality is particularly opposed to the emphasis on gender as a social dimension that singularly influences environmental subjectivities. His writings counter reifications of social categories such as gender, caste, and class because he believes that practice, including involvement in forest protection or forest governing councils, is more influential for subject formation and concern for the environment. The “external signs of belonging” such as “gender/caste/class,” he posits, are not as important as the contingent practices that span categorical affiliations (Agrawal 2005, 163). In his work on the “intimate government” of forest councils in Kumaon, a region that neighbors Garhwal in Uttarakhand, he focuses on the ways that institutional regimes of environmental regulation lead to the emergence of “environmental subjects,” a term that refers to ‘people who care about the environment’ (Agrawal 2005, 161–62). Acknowledging that the residents of Kumaon vary in their beliefs about forest protection, he argues that these variations are related to their involvement in regulatory practices rather than their “social-structural location in terms of caste or gender” (Agrawal 2005, 163).

Although Arun Agrawal illuminates how the decentralized governance of nature can promote conservation, his aversion to gender, caste, and class overlooks the aspects of social disparity that shape gendered differences in practice and experience, including access to, and integration in, institutional domains. In the case of gender inclusion in environmental initiatives, the representation of

female bodies in organizational structures does not guarantee equal participation, discursive or otherwise (O'Reilly 2007). The same is true for class and caste difference, something that Nandini Sundar (2005) points out in her critique of Agrawal's work.

While Arun Agrawal rightly resists arguments that present women as innately more concerned about the environment than men, it is critical to continue exploring gender as a dimension of sociality that influences environmental practice and subjectivity. This is significant because practice is something that we do in-body, and the biological differences that we embody do affect our social locations, including our "situated" and partial knowledges of the world (Haraway 1991). Rather than idealizing those who fall into socially constructed gender categories, the goal is to recognize that women's particularities of perception and action are grounded in the insights that they develop while holding contradictory locations inside and outside of the public sphere along with their "materially embodied labor" (Salleh 2009). It is for such reasons that many feminists argue that the theory about the close female connection to nature is problematic (Littig 2001). Some also worry that the assumption that women are particularly close to nature undermines feminist arguments that work against the naturalization of gender differences that can serve to legitimize women's subordination (*ibid.*, 14).

Despite my hesitations about Arun Agrawal's position on the role of gender in environmental movements, I am sympathetic to his concern that we reflect heterogeneity rather than lumping "women" into a singular category (see also Ahearn 2004; Ortner 1974).<sup>14</sup> The diverse women in Garhwal, after all, have distinct subjectivities, identities, politics, and attachments to place (Gururani 2014). Accordingly, I have worked to show the nuance of everyday practice and experience that women from different socioeconomic and geographic contexts demonstrate. The need to be vigilant about overgeneralizations relates to robust scholarly debates over the nature of feminism. Butler's (1999) famous commentary on the social production and performativity of gender/sex, for instance, criticizes the unproblematic use of "women" as a subject of feminism because it can preclude the possibility of a pluralist and radically representational politics.<sup>15</sup> Saba Mahmood (2005) further argues that a rigid approach to feminism might not allow us to understand what women find meaningful in their everyday lived complexities; this would overlook the dynamism and diversity of women's agency.

## SO . . . WHY DID WOMEN PARTICIPATE IN DAM OPPOSITION EFFORTS?

The motivation behind this chapter was to answer a question: Why did so many Garhwali women join the dam opposition movements? I suggest that the answers lie in recognizing the importance of past and present resource struggles, and in the added potency of cultural-religious, socioeconomic, and political ecology considerations. Drawing from precedents of women's activism, the campaign overview showed that many efforts were grounded in desires for equitable, mountain-centric development. What the exploration of gendered practice also indicates is that not all women have the same concerns and practices in relation to the river. Semi-urban women can be more motivated by the emotional and cultural implications of the river's interruption than village women, who are often quick to highlight the livelihood challenges ahead should the Ganga be seriously disrupted.

Gender, however, is not synonymous with "women." By looking at disparate responsibilities and struggles, this discussion highlights conditions that influence the everyday practice of different biological sexes. Although numerous mountain men do drink alcohol, many are industrious householders who must migrate to earn an income and who, therefore, have limited firsthand experience of the challenges associated with localized change. The prospect of employment also influences men's perspectives on the value of hydroelectric development because the projects can enable some to stay in their region of origin. These observations show the flipside to the "90 percent" estimate of women's participation in movement activities.

By way of summary, I hope to counter oversimplified arguments. Women, for instance, do *not* have a "natural" connection with the Bhagirathi Ganga. Their concerns are also *not* merely grounded in religious considerations. And women's activism is *not* just a product of prior movement involvement. Instead, women's movement participation is the product of numerous overlapping forces that includes the historical, sociocultural, and economic considerations that women and men in the Garhwal Himalaya navigate. These pressures assert themselves on gendered bodies in different ways, influencing a division of labor that in turn shapes practice and mediates the development of knowledge about, and preoccupation with, the changes taking place. The differential involvement of women and men in the opposition to high-altitude dams on the Ganga affirms that

socially dictated gender differences impact the development of concern for the natural world and the outlets and opportunities to act in its defense.

These arguments link back to the utility of considering political ecology approaches to resource conflict. Given the gendered aspects of investigation, they also speak to the role of feminist political ecology and its resurgence (Elmhirst 2011). While I do not sustain a feminist political ecology approach throughout the book, I drew upon elements of the field in this chapter because it is useful for asking specific questions about how socially determined gender difference can result in distinct responsibilities and responses to issues such as water access (Sultana 2009; Truelove 2011). In some ways, these insights overlap with observations in the field of “women and water.” Components of this literature argue that the inclusion of gender within resource management investigations is important in India and across South Asia (Ahmed 2005; Lahiri-Dutt 2006, 2012; Ray 2008; Sultana 2010, 2011).<sup>16</sup> While I concur, an aim of this chapter—and of this book—is to factor in some of the immaterial points of concern that differently gendered bodies can also demonstrate toward water, a move that follows the insights of Anne Feldhaus (1995). Alongside the physical needs and desires of resource access, the cultural and religious points of concern identified in this chapter act as significant sources of motivation. The combined attention to both resource needs and religious reverence for water bodies means that there is a role for political ecology analyses attuned both to the insights of feminism and to the religious affect expressed for socially revered resources.

# INTERLUDE

## A PRO-DAM RALLY

**A**UGUST 27, 2009: All the shops closed early in the main market of Uttarakashi. The narrow, winding lanes that would normally be bustling with mid-day commerce are nearly deserted when I enter town. Only a handful of storekeepers work hurriedly to pack up and secure the sliding metal sheets that, once padlocked, seal the doors to the outside world. I ask one group of workers if it is a holiday as they haul heavy sacks of rice and lentils inside a store. "No holiday," they reply, "it's a strike. The dam builders are coming through. If we don't close shop, they'll tear it down." As he speaks, an announcement is audible from the main activity grounds, a space reserved for fairs, cricket matches, and the occasional protest.

I increase my pace to reach the open-air field. When I arrive, I see a giant tent erected in the eastern corner with an assembly of hundreds standing underneath. After preliminary inquiries, it becomes clear that this is no ordinary pro-dam rally. Flags for the Congress Party, one of India's two main political parties, wave around the tent. I begin asking people about the protest—is it organized by the NTPC company, the ones building the dam, or is it a Congress Party event?—when three jeeps storm onto the grounds, stopping near the tent. Young men quickly jump onto the roofs and bumpers to yell animated slogans through a loudspeaker. "Death to those who oppose the dams!" shouts the man with the microphone. "Death to them, death to them!" comes the chorus.<sup>1</sup> When I hear the slogans, I begin to back up slowly, seeking refuge in the women's corner of the tent. Do they know that I was making inquiries at NTPC headquarters the

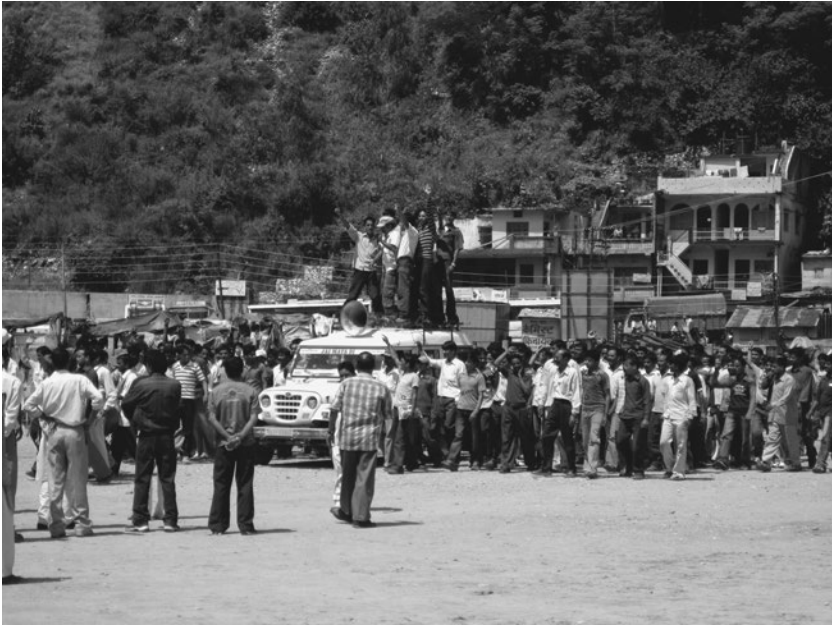


FIGURE 12. A Caravan of Pro-Dam Youth Storming the Ram Lila Grounds in Uttarkashi

day before? Will anyone recognize me as the foreigner who spends time with the dam opponents?

If people know of my mixed affiliations, they do not make it apparent. Several attendees usher me to a seat in the women's section when a call from the loudspeakers urges the growing audience to assemble under the tent. As the rally gets underway, I realize that the event is, in fact, affiliated with the Congress Party. Featured speakers include some of the most prominent regional and state politicians. Many have come to see Vijay Bahuguna, a member of parliament, who makes a brief appearance to speak in favor of dams and development in the economically struggling area. Before he arrives, however, a dozen or so speakers make impassioned pleas.

One man speaks directly to the opposition's concerns: "It's not that we do not want to save Ganga," he preemptively counters. "We are not opposing Ganga. Ganga is our culture and our Mother. Ganga is our identity (pehchaan)!" After pausing to receive the applause these sentiments evoke, he employs poetry to cast doubt on the integrity of those opposing the dams. In his prose, the speaker argues that ashram residents and

religious leaders have thrown out the gods of the sacred Himalaya, only keeping in their prayers Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth. "My friends," he continues, "go and see where their sewer pipe opens up—it probably flows to the Ganga!" Then, pointing me out in the crowd of hundreds, he adds that millions of outsiders come to the region every year believing it to be paradise (*swarg*). Calling the dam opponents "fakes," who do dirty things in the name of righteous action (*dharma*), he accuses them of ruining the beauty of the land to turn a quick profit from river devotees while they dump waste and oppose progress in the mountains. After denying any affiliation with the companies involved in dam building, he argues for the resumption of the two suspended projects so that the state can become a "powerhouse" in which the youth will no longer have to beg for work.

In this tirade, G. D. Agarwal's fasts-unto-death to stop the dams are not forgotten. Recalling the retired professor's affiliation with the prestigious Indian Institute of Technology in the Indian plains, he lambasts him as a meddling outsider: "He is from Kanpur, friends. Kanpur—where the Ganga is the most polluted. And yet he comes here telling us how to treat our Mother!" Mincing no words, the speaker accuses G. D. Agarwal of misleading the hill women to incite protest for his own selfish pursuit of fame and recognition. This is followed with accusations of corruption and bribery among the dam opponents that the speaker makes a special point to call out, in some instances erroneously, by name.

Many take the podium to continue in this vein. One representative of a cadre of dam-employed youth poses a question that rouses the crowd: "It is said that Ganga is everyone's mother, that she gives of herself to everyone. Well, I ask you, can't she also give employment to her children?" To this, a loud round of applause rings out. Encouraged, the young man adds: "The movement for an independent state of Uttarakhand was made by people ready to sacrifice for the welfare of this great land. I tell you now, that movement will look like nothing compared to the fight we will undertake to complete these dams!" This sentiment is met by more applause. As he leaves the podium, the young man repeats the parting cry given by the other speakers: "Glory to Mother Ganga! Glory to Uttarakhand! (Jay Ganga Maiya! Jay Uttarakhand!)"

When the event turns into a march through the streets of Uttarkashi, I slip away through the market's back alleys to visit Radhika. Although her son Ravi was at the rally, she stayed home because she feared she would make a scene. "If I had been there, I would have spoken up in front of everyone," she later says as she hunts for pebbles in a tray of uncooked rice while sitting in her living room.<sup>2</sup> Picking one up, she thrusts it in the direction of the tented grounds and exclaims: "I would have given them a piece of my mind!" As the rest of us exchange notes on what transpired, she begrudgingly

listens, evermore intent on her pebble hunt. We observe, among other things, the way concerns over climate change and upstream glacial retreat were glossed over by speakers claiming that the environmental rhetoric obscures a political game to obstruct development in the mountains. Contemplating the proceedings, Ravi giggles, "Sister, did you hear how they ended their speeches? 'Glory to Ganga' and all that? They are destroying their mother and praising her at the same time!"

Later, when Ravi mentions the corruption charges raised against the dam opponents, Radhika decides she has heard enough. "They are saying we take money to stop the dams? Look at us," she says indignantly as she points to their simple two-room home. "Where are these funds that we are supposed to be taking?" Shaking her head, she heaves a note of disgust and declares: "Now it is up to Mother Ganga; when the time is right, they'll get their punishment." Our eyes go to Radhika, and we watch her affix a long gaze on an uncooked grain; when her vision narrows, I remember the village devta that comes to her and makes proclamations while reading rice kernels. For a moment, I wait to see if the devta will turn her utterance into a prediction of things to come. The grain, however, appears to hold no insight. Dropping it back into the tray, she rises to prepare the evening meal.



# 4

## SAVING THE GANGA

### Insiders, Outsiders, and Activist Politics

**D**URING THE PERIOD OF CONFLICT over dams on the Ganga, a number of individuals and groups from the Indian plains traveled up to Uttarkashi District to meet with villagers, organize rallies, and conduct public events that either promoted or opposed the hydroelectric projects. Although the interlude to this chapter describes an effort to support the hydroelectric projects, most “outsiders” (*baahar waale*) and “people from down below” (*niche [rehne] waale*) who came up to the mountains to discuss the issues were opposed to dam building in the region. Their actions in opposition to the projects and their efforts to question the scope and impacts of development along the Ganga were an especially heated subject of debate and controversy.

The worry over the involvement of “outsiders” in the campaigns is pertinent to the legacies of movement distrust that circulate in the Garhwal mountains. In the course of my fieldwork, people often pointed to the ups and downs of the movements and the occasional involvement of conservative Hindu groups to say that the dams were “just a political game.”<sup>1</sup> This statement was used to try to dissuade me from being too optimistic that the construction of the dams would be canceled (back when I was perhaps more vocal than I should have been about wanting them stopped) and as a way of explaining why several of my contacts and acquaintances refrained from engaging in the social movements that I studied. These same people also often noted that Hindu-identified politicians selectively used the rhetoric of saving the Ganga from dams in Uttarkashi District to earn the favor of river devotees and win votes for upcoming

national elections. I was cautioned against attaching too much importance to any given political statement for these reasons. These assertions posed a challenge, and this challenge is pertinent to the study of social movements and to the struggle for representative environmental policy.

With these interests in mind, this chapter explores the efforts of people from outside the Himalaya to address the management of the Ganga in Uttarkashi District with an emphasis on the ways that their ideas and actions clashed with mountain articulations of development and conservation. I examine disagreements over the methods chosen to contest the dams, the degree to which some Hindu religious frames overshadowed ecological concerns, and the distinct ways in which people engaged in ongoing debates over hydroelectric development in the Himalaya. Toward the end of the chapter, I address the impact that these processes had on implementing policies, such as the creation of the National Ganga River Basin Authority. My goal in focusing on policy is to examine how the concerns of mountain residents were included and omitted at the policy level. I explore these disparities while continuing to fold cultural politics into a political ecology approach that highlights the reasons for movement tensions.

Put in other words, in this chapter I stress the utility of a political ecology approach to illuminate movement friction and discord. This emphasis means that to some extent I must engage with the disagreements that are common in many social movement processes. The intermovement and intramovement conflicts that I share are conveyed to show the ways that struggles occur over distinct ideas of what is at stake in damming the Ganga, as well as over power differentials that are spread across uneven scales of action and influence. This is in line with recent turns in political ecology to critically engage disparate knowledges and conflicting visions of social and environmental justice that vary across spatial markers while linking diverse actors mobilizing around a common them. As Rademacher (2015) comments, “Anthropologists working in the tradition of political ecology have come to analyze ‘nature’ as a category that can signal relationships and processes that extend far beyond natural resources; indeed, nature often captures histories, identities, and collective aspirations tightly bound up with claims to power, economic benefit, and moral grounding” (141).

In the following discussion, I first revisit the motivations G. D. Agarwal gave for his platform and the reception that his actions received. One point of contention was the utility of the fasts-unto-death that he enacted. The debates about G. D. Agarwal’s fasting campaigns allow me to attend in more detail to the perspectives of those who critiqued his Hindu-based opposition to dams on the Ganga. They also allow me to explore why some mountain residents worried

about the sense of exceptionalism that was used to reify policies to keep the Himalaya pure or pristine, adjectives that no longer describe the areas where the Ganga flows. These points of disagreement help identify the varied ways that people expressed concern for the fate of the Ganga, the Garhwal Himalaya, and the welfare of the region's residents.

## REGIONAL DAM OPPOSITIONS: G. D. AGARWAL AND THE POLITICS OF FASTING

When G. D. Agarwal began his first fast in Uttarkashi in 2008, he launched his campaign from Manikarnika ghat. This religiously significant place along the Ganga was symbolic on many levels. A key point of daily worship, it is noted in the *Skand Puran* as one of the most prominent places for religious sacrifice in Lord Shiva's upper abode, or kashi (Nautiyal 1994). It is said that ritual done with sincere devotion at this location produces great merit (punya) and that the location's significance grows with time. Despite the sanctity of the site chosen for the campaign, G. D. Agarwal's fast inspired counterprotests. Both dam proponents and opponents confirmed news article reports that laborers employed in the dam construction paid a visit to the retired professor as he sat quietly overlooking the Ganga's flow and verbally abused him and his supporters, threatening violence if he continued his fast. Even bystanders seen as sympathetic to his actions were verbally accosted. Radhika, for instance, said that she was the target of the insults cast as she stood watching the encounter.

Not long after the tense exchange with the dam laborers, G. D. Agarwal was transported down the mountains to New Delhi where he continued his protest. He staged his subsequent fasts in locations in the Indian plains, far removed from the Himalaya. Some of my interlocutors said that he did this out of fear for how his fasts would be received in the mountains. Others told me that it was a smart and preplanned strategic move designed to make the fast more visible to politicians working in the nation's capital city. Visibility, such supporters asserted, is one of the things that led to the platform's success. These same interlocutors gave a similarly positive appraisal of the ways that he framed what was at stake, including his faith-based emphases.

As noted in the introduction, the retired professor predominantly grounded his activism against hydroelectric projects in Uttarkashi District in what he said were concerns for faith, culture, and "Hindu tradition" rather than the scientific

knowledge of his engineering profession. In his view, these nonmaterial considerations were, and continue to be, primary. He considered the scientific and environmental factors, on the other hand, to be “meaningless auxiliaries” that are limited in their ability to affect politics and government decisions (G. D. Agarwal 2008, 2–4). To protect the river and its goddess Ganga, he argued repeatedly that the flow from the glacial source at Gaumukh to the city of Uttarkashi must be left untouched. G. D. Agarwal was willing to give the ultimate sacrifice of his own life for these demands. When I asked him about the prospect of death in January 2009, G. D. Agarwal drew from Hindu scriptures and the widely held notion of reincarnation to respond, “I think that I will not die. That is why I am not afraid of death.” Smiling at one point, he even confessed to be looking forward to the next incarnation.

For G. D. Agarwal, the main issue was that the Ganga is no ordinary river and it cannot be treated as such. It was because of this stance that he denounced the government officials, scientists, engineers, planners, economists, and the “so-called educated” of India who have applied the same criteria and environmental impact assessments (EIAs) to the Ganga that they would use for the management of any other river.<sup>2</sup> They have never, he argued, considered it necessary to explore and understand the basis of Indian faith and reverence for the Ganga. “Their real aim and intention,” he proposed, “is to insult, denounce and destroy all that is unique to India’s land, its culture, and its people (who are) to be counted as second rate cousins of other nationalities of the world, far behind those of European origin.” To this, he added: “I wish to be forthright; to me, the effort to equate or consider Gangaji to any other river is an attack by the modern scientific [and] economic culture on traditional Indian culture, faith and ethos and [it] has to be fought at that level” (G. D. Agarwal 2008, 3). With the emphasis on the preservation of culture, several prominent Hindu religious figures and the heads of prominent Hindu-identified groups endorsed G. D. Agarwal’s actions and expressed solidarity. The mixed allegiances produced speculation about the retired professor’s motivations. He was at once portrayed as a righteous crusader of a just cause and as a tool and proponent of Hindu nationalism who had no right to meddle in Himalayan resource management decisions.<sup>3</sup>

What exacerbated the critique of his platform was that G. D. Agarwal asserted that it was the responsibility of “some wise people” (such as himself) to take the initiative and lead the debate. The appeal to elite leadership is why he deflected the environmental concerns and stressed instead the Ganga’s importance in Hindu cultural, religious, and spiritual practices. To underline the point,

G. D. Agarwal chose to fast precisely because he did not imagine that he would change the minds of the average person influenced by the prevalent market-driven and state-led ideologies of development and economic growth. He argued: “Particularly if I consider regional systems in India, then the protection of [the] Himalayan environment and of the Ganges and other—you may call it nature or natural resources—they are the responsibility of some of our saints and older people. They are not [the responsibility of] the common people.” His target, at least when I spoke with him, was to awaken the conscience of religious leaders to pressure politicians—a call for top-down action rather than a mass movement. Defending his reasoning, he further declared: “I don’t accept that people can become wise. Wisdom is always to be reserved for certain people at certain ages. That is why I strongly believe in our *varnaashram dharm* (caste system) where there is an upper class who can devote their time [to developing wisdom] and who can acquire that knowledge. The moment you come to the common masses, the common masses can only be led. And those who are led are not supposed to know the strategies, the tactics, and the reasons [for action].”

The retired professor expressed similarly charged sentiments about the importance of protecting the Himalayan stretch of the river at an aforementioned “Ganga Convening” (Ganga Sammelan) that took place in New Delhi during his second fast in January 2009. Well into the second week of his hunger strike, G. D. Agarwal made a brief appearance to share his perspective. Frail but animated, he began by declaring that the Ganga is the soul of Indian culture and that those who do not believe in her powers are not (true) Indians. Reminding the participants of the river’s role as a cultural mother, he made clear divisions between those who defend her from dams and those who do not. “When Mother’s life is in danger,” he scolded, “we don’t think about *chapaati* [flat bread/food] . . . When she is in danger, then we are ready to give our lives.” It was after this that he made the earlier noted statement that those who are “against” the opposition efforts should not be tolerated and “with cruelty we should destroy them.”<sup>4</sup> These words received applause from the assembly.

Many present at the January 2009 meeting continued to emphasize the river’s cultural-religious significance and the need for its protection long after G. D. Agarwal returned to his fast. Tempering the polarizing rhetoric, however, participants such as the king (maharaja) of Jodhpur urged the gathering to join forces with people from all faiths to save the Ganga. He recalled the unity that was needed in India’s struggle against British occupation during the colonial

era, and he appealed to everyone to work together for a common cause: “We are all one. We are all Indian (*Hindustani*). And there is only one Ganga.”<sup>5</sup>

As noted in the introduction, G. D. Agarwal’s fasts did garner significant attention. His first fast resulted in a 2008 government decision to declare the Ganga a national river. This was later followed by a move to create a National Ganga River Basin Authority to monitor projects on the river and to promote its “sustainable use.”<sup>6</sup> By 2009, the Bhairon Ghati and Pala Maneri projects were suspended, though government policy toward the Loharinag Pala project continued to vacillate. By 2010, G. D. Agarwal succeeded in getting construction of that third and final dam canceled, and he secured a promise that the upper stretch of the Ganga would be made part of an Eco-Zone. The latter measure, officially declared in 2012, is designed to ensure that all future development activities on the demarcated stretch undergo thorough environmental clearance processes in the interest of protecting and preserving the regional ecology.

## IS FASTING UNDEMOCRATIC? CONTESTED ACTIVIST PRACTICES

Although fasting makes sense in a Gandhian or Hindu heritage perspective, it is a highly contested practice. When I spoke with a leader of a large NGO in Uttarakashi that works on capacity building for women’s groups, he expressed cynicism over the social movement processes and the government response. At the time of our interview, only two days had passed since dam construction was first halted in February 2009. Despite the government’s apparent capitulation, the NGO worker was skeptical of the outcome. Yes, he affirmed, the projects are suspended. Echoing an often-quoted sentiment, he tempered this with a caution that the government had already spent too much money on the dams for the decision to hold. Within fifteen days, he promised, the work would resume. “Look at [the history of] Tehri dam,” he offered. “They stopped Tehri ten times. Ten times they started it again.” Although the number was likely a ballpark figure meant to emphasize the numerous times that the Tehri dam was stalled only to be taken up again, the intent was to put into question the efficacy of fasts-unto-death. This skepticism was validated within a week when construction on the Loharinag Pala project resumed. It took later court orders for the work to stop completely in May 2009.

The NGO worker's commentary was compelling because he was critical of large hydroelectric projects in the Indian Himalaya. Explaining his stance, he declared, "there is no doubt" that the dams are destructive. "But," he added tellingly, "this *bhukh badtal* method isn't correct. It is undemocratic." Rather than seeing it as a viable method for opposing projects of dubious worth, he asserted that it is a flawed strategy that forces the desire of the few onto the many. He cited the history of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (and their inability to stop the dams on the Narmada River) to support his opinion that fasting does not have long-term policy impacts. Even after listing the legacy of the Tehri dam—up to two hundred villages lost, one hundred thousand people displaced, power generation targets unmet, and a "culture vanished"—he concluded that the activists "can't stop the dams." Considering the seeming inevitability of such projects, the NGO worker advised that one's efforts could be better spent fostering resilience.

Others similarly pushed back on the tactics used by G. D. Agarwal. A prominent swami in Uttarkashi city acknowledged that starvation for spiritual purposes has an important role in Hindu religious practice; however, contrary to the idea that fasting unto death is a form of nonviolence (*aahimsa*), he argued that the tactic constitutes violence when it is used to affect political change. This is because it exacts responsibility from others for the bodily harm that can occur. What is more, he cautioned, fasts that are not taken in the spirit of humility and with the aim of spiritual betterment can lead to hypocrisy, something that even Mohandas Gandhi confronted in some of his "experiments with truth" (Gandhi 1927, 176).

A professor of the Government Postgraduate College in Uttarkashi similarly critiqued G. D. Agarwal's actions as shortsighted when commenting on the fasts. In her opinion, he and the other activists who come to protest in the mountains from "down below" are "the least bothered" about the lives and livelihoods of people living along the river. What is more, she argued, they come imposing their own ideas about "Hindu culture, spiritualism, and purity" in relation to Mother Ganga. Reflecting on this, the Uttarkashi-based professor—who had spent several decades of her life based in Garhwal—further pointed out that G. D. Agarwal spoke against electricity production and development in the mountains after years of urban living at a prestigious university in an industrial section of Uttar Pradesh. "After enjoying such things all one's life, why is he denying them to the mountain youth?" she asked. "We have to think about the people who are living in this area. Unless we consider these people, it won't be a very just, very sincere way to do conservation for Gangaji." In her recollection of

development practice and environmental protest in the Himalaya, G. D. Agarwal's fasts were another example of the deep disconnect between the desires of plain residents and the needs of the mountain residents.

The criticisms provided belie the more widespread tensions between the denizens of the mountains and those of the plains. The mountain people, or *pahaadi*, have a long-standing impression that the plains people have used their lands as both a religious playground and an endless source of resources available for extraction. This sentiment fueled elements of the conflict over Chipko, the Tehri dam, and the Uttarakhand State movement. These and other legacies are why pahaadi people feel socially and politically marginalized.

It is because of the divisions of pahaadi-versus-plains people that the lone actions of men such as G. D. Agarwal were a source of indignation, even for some Hindus who do not want to see dams on the Ganga's high-altitude reaches. It is perhaps because of this animosity that some critics of his platform suggested that outsiders like him were only interested in their own "name and fame." This was often said in English even when the commentator was primarily Hindi speaking. The idiom held significance to many interlocutors even without a translation. Over time, I became interested in the "name and fame" trope not just because of the internal divisions it revealed but also because of the movement processes that it had the potential to illuminate. The accusations of selfish motivation and personal gain in many instances seemed poorly founded on the evidence at hand, suggesting more at play than meets the eye. What emerged was a need to examine how past movement histories are grounded in myth as well as fact, remembered by people in sometimes surprising ways, and influential to contemporary campaign processes. To understand more elements of the hostilities in circulation, some reflection on the past is helpful. To recall Rademacher's earlier mentioned quotation (2015, 141), this content helps to show how the retired professor's actions intersected with the "histories, identities, and collective aspirations" that have informed the contestations over natural resource management in Garhwal, and in the region that became Uttarakhand State.

### THE NAME AND FAME GAME: CHIPKO, TEHRI DAM, AND ACTIVIST LEGACIES

Similar to the ways that G. D. Agarwal was placed in the limelight, in the written work on the Chipko (and on the Tehri dam, an example I will soon visit in



more detail), we are given detailed accounts of notable men like Sunderlal Bahuguna, who helped to draw attention to the issues and the demands of people within the movement. Whether he is written about as a Gandhian and champion of the masses (Haberman 2006; James 2014) or as a flawed character who personally profited from his activist fame (Linkenbach 2007; M. Sharma 2009, 2011), it is nonetheless lone figures such as Bahuguna that are remembered and honored years after movements fizzle and fade into history. Of the other movement members, we may recall notable women, such as Gaura Devi in the case of Chipko, but not nearly as many of them are remembered as were instrumental to the campaigns. Several interlocutors reported that even Gaura Devi was so frustrated by the appropriation and reappropriation of Chipko that she declined to speak on the matter later in her life. Such refusals to speak indicate not only anger but also the emotional nature of memories that are at odds with historical imaginings. These sentiments can persist even after people such as Gaura Devi have passed away.

In the opening scenes from a documentary film on the Chipko movement made in the late 1980s, for example, a group of three women speak directly about their disgust with those who have benefited from the movement while they have ostensibly gained little: “Get us to the prime minister; then we will talk all night,” says Bali Devi as she waves her finger at the camera. “If we talk to you about such matters,” she admonishes, “you will get fame; [therefore] we won’t say anything.” She continues with a lament that is translated for the audience in a voice over:

We are in very backward areas. The government has put us back. The environmentalist guys have put us back. We are very forward in environment. But bloody thieves, selfish greedy guys have put us back. You’ve heard us and progressed; we’ve not seen any change. We are here on the street, at the crossroads of the movement, and we’ve been projected all over the world. Everybody with their video cameras flaunted us, messed up our minds, tired out our lips, but we have got no benefit.<sup>7</sup>

We can debate whether such perceptions reflect the opinions of a few women or whether they represent a widespread belief about what transpired after the Chipko movement ended. Despite the lack of universality, what can be suggested from such commentary is that there is at the very least some documentation of anger by those who feel that the movement was taken over by personalities that

gained more in the long term than the women who were initially involved. This is what the Uttarkashi-based professor referred to when she cautioned that, in the wake of the dam opposition campaigns along the Ganga in Garhwal, history threatens to repeat itself.

Before returning to the criticism of G. D. Agarwal's actions, I add another example: that of the Tehri dam. The history of the Tehri dam movement helps me further contextualize the scope of the concern and the historical reasons for the distrust directed toward "outsiders" who are involved in contesting development in the Uttarakhand mountains.

The Tehri dam is a telling example of the changing tides of development policy and activist practice in India. Work on the Tehri dam, which was built along the lower stretches of the Bhagirathi Ganga from the 1970s onward, was halted and then resumed several times before it was completed in 2006. Since the Tehri dam comes up frequently in conversations about development debates along the Bhagirathi Ganga, its history is pertinent to explorations of contemporary project controversies. The dam inspires pride as well as bitter commentary along the reservoir and further upstream in Uttarkashi District. Although some pointed to the country's need for electricity to validate its presence, others felt it to be an unsightly affront to the region, to the goddess Ganga, and to the continuity of Hindu practices.

With a height of 855 feet (260.5 meters), the Tehri dam wall was the highest in Asia and the fifth tallest in the world when it was built. At full capacity, the dam and its four turbines are designed to produce up to one thousand megawatts of electricity in conjunction with the Kotli Bhel project downstream that can produce another four hundred megawatts. In addition to energy production, the dam can divert water to irrigate up to 270,000 hectares of land, and it can transfer as much as 270 million gallons to thirsty metropolises in the plains. Out of that total, some 162 million gallons are earmarked to service roughly four million of New Delhi's residents.<sup>8</sup> Whereas the initial estimate for the cost of construction was modest, the actual expenditure was close to US\$1 billion, a discrepancy that was not lost on dam opposition activists.

The Tehri dam's construction was surrounded by conflict. A main concern was that the dam would displace nearly one hundred thousand people (as mentioned by the NGO worker earlier in this chapter). These people would be cast out of a landscape that housed the historic capital of Tehri Garhwal, a long-time seat of regional aristocracy. This feat threatened intangible cultural heritage

as buildings belonging to the former royal family would be submerged, along with architectural features such as the picturesque Tehri clock tower. The dam also posed a danger to the regional ecology via the creation of an artificial lake, the destruction of thousands of hectares of fertile land, and the exacerbation of landslides. Environmentalists further argued that the reservoir—extending 45 kilometers (27 miles) up the Bhagirathi and 23 kilometers (14 miles) up the Bhilangana River—could potentially produce enough methane (through the decomposition of submerged organic materials) to offset the dam's promise of “clean” energy. Another prominent point of protest was that the massive reservoir would add pressure to the seismic fault below Tehri, potentially resulting in more earthquakes. If a large enough earthquake were to hit, it was even hypothesized that the dam could break. The wall of water flooding down the mountains would possibly reach all the way to cities like Rishikesh and Haridwar in the plains. Notably, this same fear was used to suggest that the Tehri dam would provide an ideal target to enemies (and the word *China* was often associated with this claim) wanting to create massive destruction by bombing the structure that forms the dam. In response to these and other concerns, significant opposition movements began to appear as early as 1978.

In the Tehri protests, ecological and scientific discourse blended into environmental campaigns that were replete with references emphasizing the religious importance of the Ganga and the sacred geography of the Himalaya. Arising on the heels of Chipko, the movement characterized a period of growing activism that transformed the “passive environmental consciousness of Indian subalterns into an organized power” (M. Sharma 2009, 36). To some, the Tehri dam opposition represented the growth of grassroots mobilization and coalition building with other domestic and international dam movements (Kothari 1998). Despite the initial surge of activity, support dwindled over the years as the movement failed to make headway and the project was increasingly regarded as an inevitability.<sup>9</sup> The perception of the Tehri dam as a foregone conclusion was very much related to the high level of discourse and public support for the development agenda of the time.

A few individuals, despite the odds, opposed the dam to the very end. Among the most notable figures was the Gandhian activist, Sunderlal Bahuguna, whose efforts in the Chipko protests were recognized internationally. Toward the final days of dam construction, Sunderlal (as he is commonly known) enacted several village awareness-raising programs and extended fasts-unto-death. He



FIGURE 13. The Tehri Reservoir

undertook these fasts alone and at great personal sacrifice; some of his fasts lasted over forty days, and one fast purportedly lasted over seventy days. Adding to the symbolism, and to ignite the waning opposition, he often fasted from a hut placed at the base of the dam's growing walls. In his appeals, he argued for the holistic, sustainable management of the Himalaya in which reforestation efforts would outpace development projects and nature would be viewed as a component of social life rather than as a commodity to be extracted (Bahuguna 1998).

In addition to the prominent displacement concerns and environmental pre-occupations, people like Sunderlal repeatedly asserted that the well-being of the goddess Ganga was at stake. He felt that the dam and its reservoir would kill the river's divine energy since only running water retains the life force, or the *shakti*, of the goddess (Bahuguna 1997). Recalling Ganga's role as a spiritual and cultural mother, he insisted that the dam would deny people access to her motherly love (Haberman 2006, 71). When the dam was finished and the reservoir waters began to rise, he conducted a symbolic ritual (*shraaddha*)—usually reserved for the loss of one's biological parents—to mark what he saw as the death of Ma Ganga (Bose 1997, 235).

Although people like Sunderlal saw the dam as a fight between good and evil, dam proponents asserted that Tehri symbolized progress, modernization, and the promise of sustained economic growth.<sup>10</sup> The voices of opposition were criticized for keeping India from reaching its full potential. Taking an extreme position, a manager of the Tehri Hydro Development Corporation (THDC) said of the opposition movements: “Environmentalists are anti-national and should not be allowed to interfere in matters that engineers know best.”<sup>11</sup> Implicit in such arguments is the presumed superiority of rational, science-based approaches to the management of the environment in service of national goals; this mentality is rooted in modernist and colonial legacies that continue to influence Indian resource management strategies (Gilmartin 1994; Iyer 2003).

## CONCERNS AND CRITICISMS OF THE TEHRI OPPOSITION

Amid the divergent arguments—the Ganga as Hindu cultural heritage and mother goddess versus the Ganga as a tool for economic growth in the national project of development—some opposed the dam but cautioned against the employment of religious rhetoric. Although sympathetic to the environmental concerns of the Tehri dam, Mukul Sharma (2009, 2011) was deeply critical of the politicized Hindu rhetoric of dam opposition and, as noted in the introduction, he worried that the movement represented an uncomfortable alliance between “green” environmentalism and “saffron” Hindu politics. In his reflections on the legacy of the movement, Mukul Sharma offered little praise for the likes of Sunderlal Bahuguna. While he did not assert that Sunderlal was a part of the Hindu conservative machinery, he suggested that the Gandhian activist allowed his dam opposition campaign to be co-opted by it.

Rather than commenting on such criticisms at length, I wish to clarify why I refer to them in the first place.<sup>12</sup> The issue is less about the veracity of what certain movement leaders were like and more about how movements operate and are remembered. I have met Sunderlal in person on three occasions, and each time he was kind, jovial, and encouraging. At our last meeting in 2006, he and his wife served me lunch at their home overlooking the then-rising waters of the Tehri dam. Sunderlal waited to eat until after I was served, and he refrained from eating rice or sugar—commodities that use large amounts of water and, in his estimation, are therefore not sustainable. Sunderlal aims to be the change

he wants to see in the world, as Mohandas Gandhi advised, and his personal day-to-day practices uphold a high level of personal integrity, determination, and fortitude. In his various speaking tours in India over a total of three or four decades, his work has served as an example for countless people to think critically about environmental sustainability and the virtue of planting trees to protect India's ecosystems (and its mountains in particular). This work has earned him extensive praise from activists, academics, and government officials (James 2014). Thus, Sunderlal has been granted some of the greatest honors that exist in India such as the Padma Vibhushan, India's second highest civilian award.<sup>13</sup>

It could certainly be argued that if more people could follow the low-impact lifestyle that Sunderlal practices and were active in community service and environmental education, there would be even more potential to make a dent in the ecological problems currently in play. Indeed, I am humbled by the work and life teachings of Sunderlal Bahuguna. I also recognize that my high-carbon lifestyle falls very short of the ideals that he endeavored to achieve for so many years. As an anthropologist, however, my personal esteem for such leaders is only one of many opinions to take into consideration. I share the critiques of Sunderlal's activist legacy because, as best I can tell, they appear to have a real impact on the level and degree of skepticism expressed by several of my interlocutors when they considered the virtue of their involvement in movement campaigns and the efficacy of high-profile, one-person campaigns (such as those enacted by G. D. Agarwal). Beyond the examples given by such men, at issue are the politics of movement representation and the challenges of equitable inclusion. This is a central concern for social movement studies, especially the scholarship emerging in the early twenty-first century.

## **ENGAGING SOCIAL MOVEMENT FRICTIONS: DEBATE AND COMMENTARY**

The arguments I make about the merits of engaging social movement tensions fall squarely within a set of writings that assert that social movement scholarship needs to engage more with the internal conflict that takes place within movements. While not entirely revisionist, this scholarship contends that some of the past approaches and analyses may be inadequate, especially when they rely on presumptions of common identity as they sometimes did with the literature that was termed the "new social movement" studies (Ray and Katzenstein 2005;

Shah 2004; Tourraine 1981). What is needed to enrich our examinations, by contrast, is an emphasis on movement discord and fracture. This insight is not geographically dependent; numerous scholars working in Latin America and South America make similar arguments (Edelman 2001; Wolford 2006, 2010).

The call to address discord applies across campaigns—from land rights to human rights to gender rights. Contemplating the transnational movement against gender violence from the 1970s to the 1990s, for instance, Laurel Weldon makes the following observations: “Existing scholarship on social movements that attributes successful cooperation to shared interests, identities, or opportunities is incomplete because it does not take account of relations of domination *among* activists who cooperate . . . Attending to the context of structural inequality in which social movements operate improves our understanding of social mobilization and illuminates overlooked paths to cooperation” (2006, 56). In her work, Weldon is particularly attentive to the role of “internal minorities,” people from historically marginalized subgroups that can be nominally included in movements even while those from more privileged groups dominate decision making. The point of such endeavors is not to lambast the privileged but to point out that a lack of adequate inclusion can make movements weak, fragmented, and unable to achieve the change they desire. By contrast, when norms of inclusivity are enacted alongside increased opportunities for physical and discursive representation, movements can maintain solidarity and influence policy (*ibid.*, 65). These words of caution are important to take into consideration when we evaluate the utility of social movement practices.

Not everyone would agree that examining the nitty gritty of movement processes is necessary in order to understand movement outcomes. In her earlier work, Frances Fox Piven suggested that social movement scholars should focus on the policy impacts of social movements, which she saw as “forms of purposive political action” (2006, 82). The impact assessment of movement practices, she contends, is significant because movements raise the difficult and conflictual issues that party leaders often avoid. She writes:

The urgency, solidarity, and militancy that conflict generates lends movements distinctive capacities as political communicators. At least for a brief time, marches and rallies, strikes and shutdowns, can break the monopoly on political discourse otherwise held by politicians and the mass media. Where politicians seek to narrow the parameters of political discussion . . . movements can expand the political universe by bringing entirely new issues to the fore and by forcing new remedies into consideration. (*ibid.*, 104)

This observation is certainly true in the case of the movements to contest dams on the Ganga; in fact, it would be hard to imagine that the dams would have been a subject of extensive public discussion and debate if it had not been for the social movement activity. That said, I still concur, following Weldon's remarks, that attention must be placed simultaneously on the internal struggles for equity and representational balance within movements *even as* we also aim to assess their overall policy footprints. After all, and as Piven also notes, movements subside, and when they do, "other political interests reemerge and gain traction, including political interests that draw their support from the unease and opposition generated by the movements themselves" (2006, 108). Such commentary reinforces attention to the internal as well as external "unease and opposition" generated by movements.

## MOVEMENT FRICTIONS THAT MATTER

The reflections raised here are not merely academic; in fact, participants in the movements to stop hydroelectric dams on the Ganga held debates that mirror the aspects of the scholarly discussion. In July 2009, when opposition to the three high-altitude dams on the Ganga was still in full swing, different actors and activists engaged in heated discussions about the best way to go about securing a positive outcome for their cause. I witnessed one such exchange at the ashram that served as a base for the Ganga Ahvaan efforts. At the time, a plains-based student activist had come up to the mountains to arrange yet another rally—this one right on the heels of a campaign organized by the Ganga Ahvaan members that had garnered the participation of hundreds of women from nearby settlements. The youth activist, who was under the directive of a prominent Hindu swami from the Indian plains (a type of personage that is also referred to respectfully as a Mahatma), was hoping to coordinate another high-profile event. The timeframe for the envisioned program was short, and the Ganga Ahvaan participants who were gathered at the ashram did not feel it would sufficiently engage the dam-affected residents. For this reason, they cautioned the youth that he was going about organizing the rally in the wrong way; this resulted in the following exchange:

GANGA AHVAAN COORDINATOR: "The support of the locals is important. If a big group comes up from below, and if the local folks see this, then there will be difficulties."



PLAINS-BASED YOUTH ACTIVIST: “No, it is not like that. Everyone . . . [wants to do something for Ganga].”

GANGA AHVAAN COORDINATOR: “I know how people here are. They will say that outsiders are trying to destroy our employment [opportunities]—there is a ‘faction’ like that.”

PLAINS-BASED YOUTH ACTIVIST: “[But] the Mahatmas are also from below.”

GURU (THE ASHRAM’S SPIRITUAL LEADER, WHO WAS ALSO PRESENT): “Those Mahatmas don’t understand. I am telling you because I know the ‘psychology’ of the people here. You people don’t know what it is like here.”

PLAINS-BASED YOUTH ACTIVIST: “I have spent a month here.”

GURU: (Speaking harshly) “I have lived here for twenty-five years!”

The discussion continued in this vein and became quite heated. The youth activist stood firm in his position despite the concerns of the Ganga Ahvaan members. A lead Ganga Ahvaan coordinator, meanwhile, tried to underscore her main point. “This is what I am saying,” she insisted: “However much time [you come for], however many people you bring [to the mountains]—get them all together and go to the villages. That is what we are doing.” Explaining this approach, she stressed that her focus from the start had been to get the women from these parts involved so that the “local voice” can be heard (*local logon ki aavaaz uthaae*).

The youth activist ended up acknowledging the position of the Ganga Ahvaan members, but he nonetheless went on to organize the rally that he and the Hindu swamis from the plains envisioned. It made the headlines, of course, but the numbers were much smaller than the earlier demonstration organized by the Ganga Ahvaan members who predominantly lived in the mountains. As it turned out, the response to the rally was exactly as the Ganga Ahvaan members predicted. Soon after the event led by the “outsiders,” the massive pro-dam demonstration that I highlighted in the interlude to this chapter took place. The commentary of youth laborers and Congress Party officials substantiated the cautions given by the Ganga Ahvaan coordinator as many of the statements suggested that intruders were trying to deprive the mountains of employment and development opportunities. Some even claimed that the dam opponents were benefiting financially from their stance. This was far from the truth when it came to the participation of the mountain activists, a point Radhika made evident when she contested the assertion and pointed to her modest living conditions. Whether



FIGURE 14. Road Construction for the Loharinag Pala Project

the plains-based activists were given a significant amount of financial support for their efforts is unclear, though I doubt that they were. What *is* evident is that the involvement and parallel programming of such “outsiders” had the additional effect of fueling intermovement and intramovement distrust and discord.

These tensions continued even after the dam cancelations were finalized in 2010. As the days wore on into months in the aftermath of the decision to close the projects, the dam construction sites languished in a dangerous half-finished state that exacerbated landslides and made transportation on the narrow, steep, and destabilized roads even more treacherous. Tens of lives were lost over the course of 2010, 2011, and 2012 as jeeps and buses fell from the washed-out roads created for, or damaged by, the dam construction. While people grieved these losses, dam proponents used the opportunity to cast blame on those who had called for suspension of their construction. Fueled by local and regional politics, a sentiment of outrage in the region gradually increased.

By the summer of 2012, entire villages and towns began campaigning for the resumption of work on the formerly disputed dam projects. In speaking with

people from the region, I was surprised to find that many of my interlocutors from years past—some of whom sacrificed long hours to organize against the dams—revised their positions and joined the call for the dams' completion for the sake of "development" (*vikaas*) in the mountains. In this call, their criticism for G. D. Agarwal was sharp; they targeted him and his activism for consigning the people of the mountains to precariousness and impoverishment. The revised demand that such informants put forth was to finish the dams but to leave a minimum (and often unspecified) quantity of flow in the Ganga to enable the continuity of cultural and religious practices. "We want the Ganga to flow," such people told me, "but we also need employment."

Around the same time, and over on the other side of the hills, another pro-dam movement was growing along the banks of the Alaknanda River (which also feeds into the Ganga's Himalayan flow). A series of dams in the region were in the national spotlight, and the same prominent activists, such as G. D. Agarwal, were involved in efforts to have their construction canceled. By then, he had taken *sanyaasi* vows and could now claim the status of a Hindu swami (his new title being Swami Gyanswaroop Sanand). In June 2012, when he attempted to visit the area for an alleged protest (*dharna*), his caravan was attacked by a mob of protesters who criticized him for inciting antidevelopment, "anti-Uttarakhand," and "anti-India" sentiments. The dam activists reportedly hurled shoes at his vehicle and chased him for some 30 kilometers (about 19 miles). G. D. Agarwal allegedly fled with colleagues such as India's "waterman" Rajendra Singh, who later claimed that the dam proponents were backed by the dam construction company and by Congress Party officials. Mr. Singh accused these leaders of using the sensitive issue of dams and development to gain votes in the upcoming elections.<sup>14</sup>

Three weeks later, as part of a countermovement in support of the dams, the minister for drinking water and education, Mantri Prasad Naithani of the Congress Party, led hundreds of people from Srinagar Uttarakhand to Jantar Mantar in New Delhi where they conducted a sit-in. The sit-in lasted no more than one day and called for the resumption of projects like the stalled Srinagar hydel project on the Alaknanda, which has a power generation capacity of 330 megawatts. In a statement, Naithani declared: "The Ganga and its tributaries are sacred for all and their sanctity would remain even after making the dams." He added: "The power projects will lead to numerous avenues of direct and indirect employment for the poor hill masses."<sup>15</sup>

In statements like Naithani's, it is the emphasis on benefiting the impoverished mountain residents that can be especially pervasive (and persuasive) in

dam proponent arguments. These assertions, however, are not entirely altruistic since there are numerous economic and political interests vested in the continuation and expansion of dam construction in the Himalaya. While I acknowledge the influence of such politics, what I want to emphasize is the result: that many erstwhile opponents of dams revised their opinions. In the interim, people continued to debate the best ways of addressing Himalayan development and conservation platforms. A key point of contention was over the value of the fast-unto-death as a protest tactic. I next engage these discussions before looking even further at the policy twists and turns.

The obvious rebuttal to the examination of internal movement tensions is to ask: So what? If the dams were canceled, one could suggest, should we not be pleased with the ends, regardless of the means? In the next section, I examine more closely the policy changes that resulted from the dam opposition campaigns. I look primarily at the decisions made from 2008 to 2010, leaving aside the discussion of the Eco-Zone, which is the focus of chapter 5. In jumping up a scale to examine the working dynamics and discussions of government-level committees, I aim to “study up” the circuits of power (Nader 1972) and show, even if only through a paper trail, how the demands of key activists were taken up and acted on in policy circles. Notably, the documents from which I draw reflect an awareness of the need for public participation in development and conservation debates.

## MOVEMENT OUTCOMES AND POLICY DEBATE EXCLUSIONS

One of the early outcomes of the dam opposition campaigns was the creation of the National Ganga River Basin Authority or NGRBA on February 2, 2009. The NGRBA is notable both as an official entity working to address the Ganga’s sound management and as a government authority that, at least on paper, has tried to be more inclusive of civil society representatives. According to the government’s Press Information Bureau, the NGRBA is an “empowered planning, financing, monitoring, and coordinating authority for the Ganga river” and its authority derives from the Environmental (Protection) Act of 1986.<sup>16</sup> The press release states that the NGRBA’s mandate is to ensure the effective abatement of pollution and conservation of the river and that it will achieve this task “by adopting a holistic approach” while keeping in mind “sustainable development

needs.” The prime minister of India is tasked as the ex-officio chairperson, and the authority is made up of union ministers from the states of the Ganga Basin (Uttarakhand, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, and West Bengal) along with a select number of representatives from various government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and even some civil society groups. In addition to its planning and regulatory tasks, one of the NGRBA’s main agendas is to ensure minimum ecological flows in the Ganga. This is to be done by regulating water extraction and by promoting water storage projects. The technical and administrative support comes primarily through the Ministry of Environment and Forests with additional expertise provided within and beyond the government for advice on “techno-economic issues.” I emphasize this latter point for its secular and scientific emphasis. No mention of religion was made in the press release.

The notification of the establishment of NGRBA created a buzz, as did the coterminous announcement that the Ganga was awarded the honor of a “national” river. Like national birds and national flowers, the assumption (and hope) was that the Ganga would be granted more protections than other rivers. The distinction was an important step toward this end because its national status would, in principle, allow the government to make *exceptions* for the Ganga that it would not have to apply to India’s other numerous water bodies. This is significant because the efforts to protect and preserve the river’s ecological services, as well as the minimum flow needed to enable the sociocultural practices dependent upon accessing the Ganga, would ostensibly be difficult and costly to implement elsewhere. From the perspective of industry and government offices, a possible worry was that the “holistic approach” to support the Ganga’s integrity could negatively impact the nation’s developmental agenda if it were applied to the management of all Indian rivers.

The NGRBA’s first meeting was on October 5, 2009. Most of the discussion items focused on the need to tackle the hazardous pollution problems that have plagued the Ganga’s flow in the Indian plains for decades. To address this, a representative of the Ministry of Environment and Forests proposed a “Mission Clean Ganga 2020” program to ensure that, by the year 2020, no untreated municipal sewage or industrial effluent will be discharged into the river.<sup>17</sup> The proposal noted that an estimated investment of 150 billion rupees (15,000 crore or US\$3.375 billion as per October 5, 2010, exchange rates) was needed over the following ten years to create the necessary treatment and sewage management infrastructures. It was suggested that the central government could provide an estimated 70 percent of these funds and that the states would be expected to

supply 30 percent of the resources needed.<sup>18</sup> Shortly thereafter, the government of India received funding of US\$1 billion from the World Bank for the renewed Ganga cleanup initiatives. The announcement of this “credit and loan” on the World Bank’s website demonstrates remarkable confidence in the renewed efforts, stating: “The NGRBA has created a framework to ensure that all investments under the Program are well-prepared, effective in reducing pollution, are socially and environmentally sustainable, and proceed with transparent decision-making.”<sup>19</sup> According to their press release, US\$199 million is provided by the World Bank’s “poverty-focused fund” with a term of thirty-five years to maturity and a ten-year grace period. The remaining US\$801 million is a “low-interest loan” with a maturity of eighteen years and a five-year grace period. The terms and conditions remind us that the funding is still very much a part of the World Bank’s profit-generating business model.

At that first convening of the NGRBA in 2009, the dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga were raised as a topic of discussion roughly halfway through the meeting. One of the longest agenda items in the meeting minutes, there is evidence of considerable back-and-forth about what is termed the “issue of continuance” of the Loharinag Pala, Pala Maneri, and Bhairon Ghati hydroelectric projects. At the time, there was an order from the high court of Uttarakhand in effect that temporarily stopped the construction activities. Rajendra Singh, who served on the authority as a representative of the water recharge and conservation organization known as Tarun Bharat Sangh, made arguments in favor of allowing the river’s free flow. As recorded in the minutes, he argued, “it is essential to preserve the Ganga in its *pristine state* [my emphasis] and avoid activities which have the potential to affect the natural flow of the river.” A second to this argument was recorded before rebuttals were offered.

The secretary of the Ministry of Power contested Rajendra Singh’s dam opposition remarks and reminded the attendees that substantial investments had been made on the projects and “85 percent” of the “civil work” was already completed—a term that I take to refer to the civil engineering of the dam sites. The chief minister of Uttarakhand at the time, Ramesh Pokhriyal of the Congress Party, seemed to support this view, noting that while it is important to maintain a minimum flow in the Ganga, “there is no harm” in harnessing the river’s flow in nonwinter months when the river is plentiful. He also remarked that, “in the event of a decision not to continue with these hydroelectric projects, Uttarakhand will have to be adequately compensated by provision of free power supply from the Central pool.” He was suggesting, in short, that a decision to cancel the

dams outright would be costly because the state would demand reimbursement from the central government for the loss of opportunity.<sup>20</sup>

The NGRBA met for the second time nearly fourteen months later. By then (November 30, 2010), several months had passed since the government decree stopping the high-altitude dams on the Ganga. Despite this, the dam cancellations still appeared to be in debate. The prime minister at the time, Manmohan Singh, offered an opaque statement that the NGRBA's mandate was to ensure both a clean river (*nirmal dhaara*) and a continual flow (*aviralta*), and that, "in this regard," it is important to "relook at the issue of hydroelectric projects" on the upper reaches of the Ganga. Ramesh Pokhriyal provided similar rebuttals and cautions as per the first meeting, saying that along with adequate flows "developmental imperatives should be given due importance." Pointing out that the halted work on the Loharinag Pala project alone had resulted in the "loss of employment for a large number of people," he requested that the needs of the people living along the banks of the Ganga be given "adequate consideration" in decisions about the continuance of developmental projects. He also reiterated his assertion that the period of nonwinter flows could be used for hydroelectric projects. The chief minister of Uttarakhand gave a number to his earlier call for compensation, stating that 2,000 megawatts of hydroelectric power should be provided to the state in return for the closure of the three high-altitude hydroelectric projects. He then made a suggestion that he appeared to contradict: At first, the chief minister requested that Uttarakhand be offered a special provision, "given its status, its dependence on forest resources, and the limitations imposed by the need to conserve these resources." He went on to say, however, that the proposal to declare the 135 kilometers from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi an Eco-Zone would adversely impact the legitimate developmental needs of the people of the region.<sup>21</sup> As recorded in the meeting minutes, the chief minister's arguments received the following commentary:

12.1 Responding to Uttarakhand Chief Minister's observations, M(o)EF [The Ministry of Environment and Forestry] clarified that the notification pertaining to [the] eco-sensitive zone would be issued only after due consultations with all stakeholders, including the State Government. He further clarified that this will not mean a total prohibition on all developmental activities. The activities to be prohibited and activities to be regulated will be duly identified and listed in the notification, which will be issued after due consultations.<sup>22</sup>



While the commentary is not particularly riveting, I provide the entirety of the minutes on that agenda item to emphasize the assurances made in response to the state government's concerns. In the end, two important measures were decided at the second meeting. The first decision was that the Loharinag Pala, Pala Maneri, and Bhairon Ghati hydroelectric projects "may be discontinued, as duly recommended." By reifying the government's May 2010 decision, the dam cancelations were seconded and momentum was built for the Eco-Zone implementation. The second decision was that the stretch of the Ganga from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi "may be declared" an Eco-Zone and "the relevant notifications may be issued after due consultations."<sup>23</sup> As a prelude to chapter 5, it is worth emphasizing again that the meeting minutes suggested that consultations take place with "all stakeholders."

Ramesh Pokhriyal served as the chief minister of Uttarakhand from June 2009 to September 2011 before being replaced by B. C. Khanduri of Congress from 2011 to 2012 and Vijay Bahuguna of the BJP from 2012 to 2014. In presenting his commentary, I do not wish to paint him as a selfless champion of mountain residents' needs, desires, and rights. Platforms such as Pokhriyal's were decidedly in favor of large development projects like the ones that were canceled. His concerns were thus likely influenced by his support of the business interests and regional energy and industry needs at stake in the development conflict. Perhaps this explains his dual stance on the kind of exceptionalism he envisioned. Ostensibly, the "special status" for which he argued would have enabled Uttarakhand to receive extra government assistance. An indication of this is his request for the NGRBA's projects in Uttarakhand to be funded on a 90:10 basis, where 90 percent of funds would be offered by the central government and 10 percent of funds would be provided by the state government (whereas the first meeting's proposal was 70:30). The envisioned assistance model would perhaps not restrict the state's ability to make autonomous development decisions in the way feared with the Eco-Zone.

## **TOWARD A REGIONAL APPROACH TO CONSERVATION AND "SUSTAINABILITY"**

Although the NGRBA made some headway, and the high-altitude dams along the Ganga are canceled (at least at the time of writing), this did not put an end



to the conflict over the use of the river or the struggle over development in the region. The main reason for this was that many residents in Garhwal had the impression that the decisions made in faraway New Delhi did not benefit them. This speaks to the value of thinking with not just political ecology but also with what Haripriya Rangan calls a “regional political ecology” (2000a). Her phrasing places emphasis on the processes that lead to ecological change (and environmental policy) *in particular regions* (ibid., 64–5). It also asks us not to forget the people living in those regions. While the central argument of this book is that there is a role for a religiously attuned formulation of political ecology, the suggestion that Rangan provides is a reminder to develop historically informed understandings of the relations between resource politics, political economy, and policy as they move between the regional, the national, and the international.

The regional impacts of the policies taken, and the sense that the region of Garhwal had become a pawn in a larger political game, were something that people in Uttarkashi District stressed to me. When I returned to Uttarkashi in the summer of 2010, for instance, countermovements were protesting the cancellation of the dams and urging the central government to reopen the projects. During that follow-up visit, and while chatting with a group of men in a tea shop about the dams, I was handed an appeal composed by the mountain “youth” (*yuva*). It summarized the issues and requested that people not forget their plight, the plight of the people who continue to reside along the Ganga in the Garhwal Himalaya.

The appeal began by making general observations that speak to the different discourses in circulation. From the point of view that prioritizes the nation’s development above all else, the youth noted, dams should be constructed wherever possible. From a strictly religious point of view, they noted, dams should perhaps not be constructed on the sacred Ganga. And, from a strictly environmental point of view, no dam should be built on any river. The result, they argued, is that there was enough government momentum to build the dams and then enough religious and environmental indignation to have them stopped when they were nearly completed. Now, the youth appeal pointed out, the hillsides are ravaged, land has been lost, and long tunnels have been drilled through the mountains resulting in the depletion of groundwater supplies. We neither have development, they asserted, nor the “environment” we enjoyed before. The youth lamented: “We (Garhwalis) are hanging in between.” Considering the situation, they urged prominent actors like G. D. Agarwal to come back up to the mountains and rectify the situation by going on more fasts-unto-death to

force the government to resume the dam building. If he did not help them, they reasoned, that would call into question his concern for the welfare of mountain residents and shed light on his “skewed” motivations.

The youth were not alone in their criticisms; others similarly argued that Himalayan development and environmental policies must first and foremost benefit mountain people. As the aforementioned Uttarkashi-based professor repeatedly stated in our conversations: “We need a development model that thinks about the people of the mountains. Until we have policies that improve their lives, there can be no true development.” For her and others, this argument is not a *carte blanche* that validates the destruction of Himalayan ecologies or the sacred Ganga. In an ideal world, the maintenance of mountain ecologies and cultural-religious practices could coincide with policies that prioritize regional development. What her comments importantly respond to is a reaction—which she perceives as a knee-jerk impulse—to protect mountain environments without considering equity or the survival of the people who live there.

One of my main interlocutors made a similar point but framed it somewhat differently: A Hindu swami with an exceptional amount of knowledge about regional livelihoods and cultural-religious practices was critical of the movement processes and the imbalanced ways in which the decisions about the Ganga’s management were made. He was also sympathetic to my studies and efforts to understand the scope of the conflict and, at one point, he offered praise for the anthropological project. Among the social sciences, he pondered, anthropology offers a more comprehensive view of the issues it examines. That said, he was critical of attempts to reduce important life-and-death matters to mere academic debate; he often cautioned that the ways we can best help is by pointing out the needs and desires of people living on the ground. In his opinion, any work that is of benefit “must start at the grassroots.” If our efforts to promote development, conservation, or “sustainability” are not linked to the everyday lives and struggles of the masses, he argued, then the results will be superficial and short lived. If, moreover, we truly wish to facilitate something akin to “grassroots development,” then it will be crucial to allow people to demarcate for themselves the things that matter to them that they wish to promote or protect. The promotion of such efforts is not just for the anthropologist; it requires cross-sectoral collaborations to have a substantial and sustained impact.

These points lead us to consider that what constitutes one person’s understanding of the sound use of resources does not necessarily enable the realization of a commonly held notion of sustainability. As Sharachchandra Lélé and

Richard Norgaard argue, we must keep in mind the “for whom and by whom?” questions of sustainability (1996, 356). In other words, if we safeguard an entity or region, what is gained, who are the beneficiaries, and who misses out? They contend: “Rather than impose their own perceptions of what should be sustained and for whom, for how long, and with what certainty, it would be less destructive for science and more productive for the policy process if scientists allowed these value judgments to emanate from society” (1996, 362). These cautions are highly relevant for a political ecology approach to understanding the distinct knowledge positions and power differentials in which questions of development, conservation, and sustainability are embedded. In the next section, I move on to explore how such points of friction can lead some people to dispute something as seemingly valuable and universally acceptable as an Eco-Zone.

# INTERLUDE

## SARITA CHANGES TUNE

**A**UGUST 23, 2012: It is early in the afternoon, and I have only just arrived at Sarita's house to see how she and her husband feel about the canceled dams and the proposed creation of an Eco-Zone in their region. I haven't seen them in over two years, not since my trip to Uttarkashi in May 2010 for the kumbh mela festivities. I should have come earlier in the day, but I had a long interview earlier in the morning and the formalities of that event, which included a sit-down meal, took longer than expected.

Sarita's house is located below a curve on the two-lane "highway" that leads to Gangotri. Like other market enclaves of its kind, it is lined with a handful of shops and a few modest hotels with small eateries. In the short fifty-foot walk from the road down a slope leading to where Sarita lives, the scenery changes considerably with the signs and features of a more agriculturally based lifestyle. Passing an outhouse and a cow tethered to the hillside, I turn left to see a narrow lane of apartments. In front of the apartments is a walkway with a rope-tied single bed (*charpoi*), a number of plastic chairs, and a blanket laid out on the cement floor that is littered with what appears to be freshly harvested edible greens.

The walkway is where the family spends most of their time tending to children, cutting vegetables, sorting agricultural goods, and relaxing with a meal. It is no surprise, then, when I look up to see Sarita's husband sitting on one of the plastic chairs with a cup of tea in hand looking out at the mountainside across from the ravine. The man, whom I will call Darban, is surprised to see me, and he stands in greeting with a short

bow that serves as a substitute for a namaste gesture when one's hands are occupied or when the context is informal.

Once the pleasantries are exchanged, Darban is quick to lightly admonish me for not calling in advance. I explain that I tried to call many times but, as is usual for the telecommunication inadequacies and electricity shortages in the mountains, his phone was invariably unreachable or switched off. This settles the matter, but he laments that if I had been able to reach him, he would have arranged for Sarita to be home for my visit. As it turns out, he says, she is off with a group of women at a meeting and will not be back until much later. When I inquire as to what type of meeting it might be, asking if it is perhaps a *mahila mangaldal* event (since Sarita is the leader of the women's organization for her township), Darban is noncommittal. His reply is to wave away the question with his free hand and say that it is "something like that."

Our conversation meanders over several topics: We discuss what I've been up to since my last visit, and I inform him that I finished my degree and now have a research and teaching position. This delights him, and he shakes my hand in congratulations, insisting that the good outcome shows the blessings of Ma Ganga and her support of my work. He wants to know how much I earn, of course, and makes no hesitation before asking. I divert the reply by indicating that it is enough to get by. This prompts him to discuss the rising costs in India and the difficulties of making a living in the hills. Added to this, he says, is the lack of employment and the challenges of the strange and newly unpredictable weather patterns that are making agriculture increasingly hard.

Darban was an ardent dam opponent when the movements were active back in 2008 and 2009, and yet, when he spoke of unemployment, I catch that his hand points upstream toward the stalled dam construction. At my prompting, he concedes that, nowadays, the way people think about the dams is starting to change. The dams were never a good idea, he insists, but the decision to stop them without repairing the damage or coming up with employment alternatives is also not good. I nod, mentally noting how different his demeanor is from our earlier visits when any mention of dams would send him shouting that he was ready to defend the Ganga from harmful development activities with his life.

There is a pause in the conversation as another family member offers me a cup of tea. When we resume, I focus on this seeming change of heart. It would be hard for him to state directly what is on his mind since so many of our past conversations were about his involvement in the dam opposition. To give him room to maneuver, I offer a tentative critique of the current policy process to let him know that my own thinking is potentially undergoing revision. I start by noting that others have complained about the lack of jobs in the hills since the dams were closed and that the abandoned

construction sites are a hazard for residents. In discussing the issue with others, I share that people I respect have said that if Dr. G. D. Agarwal was truly concerned with the welfare of the mountain people, he should have continued his fasts to pressure the government to repair the hillsides and offer development alternatives.

Darban's back straightens after my disclosure, and he becomes more animated. I try to show little sign of a reaction when he says that this is exactly how he and the people of his village are starting to feel. They never wanted the dams, he repeats—they worked hard to tell everyone of the ways the projects might harm the Ganga and diminish the frequency of the cultural and religious practices connected with accessing its free flow—but they also never imagined that the mountain folk would be abandoned once the dams were canceled. It made them feel that it was all a political game, he comments, and that their love and faith for the Ganga was used for the benefit of others. To my surprise, he says that even Sarita shares this sentiment. In fact, he says, at that very moment she is at a meeting in Bhatwari where residents have gathered to discuss the latest developments and demand that the dams be reopened.

The proverbial cat is now out of the bag—Sarita is not at a women's meeting to discuss self-help programs, as I imagined, but she is at a sizeable event upstream where people are arguing against the likes of G. D. Agarwal and calling for the dams to be finished and made operational. When I restate this point, Darban clarifies that of course her change of mind has come only after considerable thinking on the matter and only after speaking extensively with the women in her organization whose sons were moving away in search of employment and whose family members had suffered injuries or death on the crumbling roads left in disrepair after the projects were abandoned. In fact, he says, she is not merely demanding that the dams be reopened, as others are, but that they be maintained with the firm clause that, come what may, the dam managers are obliged to keep half of the water in the riverbed at all times so that a constant flow is made available to residents, as well as the plants and animals that depend on the water. They are also arguing that if the dams are built, the nearby settlements should be given electricity for free. She still does not like the dams, he insists again, but there seem to be few other options. Besides, he notes, she was under a lot of pressure from the people she represents and, at the end of the day, "one has to live in society."

For the same reasons that Darban is upset about the current state of affairs, he is also concerned about the rumors he has heard regarding the proposed Eco-Zone. As I would come to discover, he and many other residents of the region are uncertain of the particulars of the plan, but they suspect that it will be another attempt to manage the hills in ways that align with the thinking of the plains rather than the desires of the mountain residents. "It is a game," he laments again, "it is all a game." Looking back to

the mountainside, he contemplates the irony that those who hold the Ganga most dear are made to suffer the most.

I look to my watch, calculating that the meeting is still underway and anticipating that there are only two hours of daylight left. Darban gives me Sarita's new cellular number, but it is unreachable. Taking my leave, I decide to try and meet Sarita at the event and speak with her there. As luck would have it, a passing off-duty ambulance full of uninjured sadhus stops to offer me a ride, and they drop me off a half-hour later uphill in the town of Bhatwari. When I arrive, the meeting is finished and everyone has dispersed. I have invariably passed Sarita on the road as she was returning home. I speak instead to the handful of men discussing the meeting at a roadside tea stall. They are quite upset about the dam closures, but getting them to talk openly is difficult because they suspect that my alliances are mixed and that I might be one of the dam opponents. Several of the men decline to have their comments recorded.

Noting the late hour and the need to return to Uttarkashi for early morning meetings the following day, I book a taxi back to town. On the way, I finally reach Sarita on her phone, and we agree to meet a week later. "Come on time," she urges me. "We have a lot to discuss."

# 5

## ECO-ZONES ON THE GANGA

### The Politics of Exceptionalism

ON DECEMBER 18, 2012, less than six months after the exchange documented in the preceding interlude, the government of India declared 4,180 square kilometers of the Bhagirathi Ganga's flow an Ecologically Sensitive Zone or Eco-Zone under the Environmental Protection Act of 1986.<sup>1</sup> The length of the Eco-Zone was reported as ranging from 125 to 135 kilometers (78 to 84 miles) in some media outlets, but the actual notification was for a stretch of 100 kilometers (62 miles). A total of 88 villages fall within the boundaries of the zone, and they are subject to a range of restrictions. The initial framing of the notification includes mention of the scrapped hydroelectric projects, although it does so in passing. For instance, it indicates that hydro-power construction may adversely affect a "unique ecosystem" that is "rich in aquatic flora and fauna including migratory species." It adds: "The anthropogenic pressure on ecosystems and environment has tremendously increased, causing irreparable damage to the fragile mountain ecosystem including [the] flow and [the] character of the river [Ganga]" (S.O. 293[E] 2012, 22).

In this chapter, I discuss aspects of what the Eco-Zone entails and what it was rumored to entail, along with the social (and political) reactions that it prompted. For this, I pair commentary on the details listed in the notification along with the impressions that some people had about the Eco-Zone when I returned to Uttarkashi in the winter of 2014. Toward the end of the chapter, I comment on how the rise of Eco-Zones is part of efforts to cordon off regions in India for conservation. I also note how, in other locations, the government sets



up tax-free commercial or industrial havens known as Special Economic Zones. Although they spring from similar mentalities, there is a stark contrast between the Eco-Zones and the Special Economic Zones in terms of what they enable in the areas implemented.

## THE ECO-ZONE NOTIFICATION: GUIDELINES AND INITIAL REACTIONS

The Ministry of Environment and Forests published the Eco-Zone notification in an official gazette that is dated December 18, 2012. Although it is online, and openly available, few people in regions such as Uttarkashi have convenient and cost-effective access to the Internet. For this reason, and because there was limited circulation of the printed text, its details were initially not widely understood. The official document includes commentary split into four sections that address the boundaries of the “eco-sensitive zone,” the “zonal master plan” for the eco-sensitive zone, the “activities to be prohibited, regulated, or permitted” within the eco-sensitive zone, and several provisions for a “monitoring committee.”

The *zonal master plan* is ostensibly another way of saying the master plan for the Eco-Zone. The section on this master plan states that it is to be crafted “in consultation with local people[,] particularly women,” within a period of two years from the date of the notification’s publication (S.O. 293[E] 2012, 24). It further indicates that all relevant government bodies will be involved with the master plan (including departments of environment, forests, urban development, tourism, public works, environmental protection, water resources, etc.). The notification indicates some of the following main points: that the Eco-Zone will provide for the restoration of denuded forests; that it will aim to conserve water resources; that it will ensure that buildings, hotels, and resorts follow “the traditional concepts and architecture of the area” (ibid., 25); that it will not allow the change of land from green uses (such as horticulture, agriculture, tea gardens, parks, etc.) to “nongreen” uses; and that the master plan will “indicate areas on hill slopes where development shall not be permitted” (ibid., 26). Additional guidelines also provide for the maintenance of springs, roads, “natural heritage,” “man-made heritage,” and tourism.

In a section on the activities to be prohibited, hydroelectric projects are the first item listed. No new hydropower projects nor the expansion of existing

projects are allowed on the river Bhagirathi (Ganga) and on all its tributaries from Gaumukh to Uttarkashi. The exception given is for micro or mini hydel power projects, “which would serve the energy needs of local communities, subject to consent of the gram sabha [village committees] and all other requisite clearances” (ibid., 31). The other prohibited activities include the following: the abstraction of river water for any new industrial purpose; the mining of minerals (as well as stone quarrying and crushing, with the exception that this can be done for domestic needs by “*bona fide*” residents [original emphasis]); the commercial felling of trees and the setting up of any wood-based industry unless it is only intended to target the needs of bona fide residents; the setting up of saw mills; the commercial use of firewood; the implementation or expansion of polluting industries; the discharge of untreated sewage and industrial effluents; the use of plastic carry bags; and the operation of hazardous waste processing units.

The list of prohibited activities is followed by a list of regulated activities, along with activities that “shall be promoted” (ibid., 35). The regulated activities have some overlap with the earlier mentioned restrictions; however, it is worth noting declarations to guard against the introduction of exotic species, the (over) plantation of pine trees, and the increase of noise and air pollution. The list of activities that are to be promoted is rather short; it includes: (i) rain water harvesting, (ii) organic farming, (iii) green technology, (iv) walking tourism, (v) micro hydel projects for local use, (vi) solar energy for local use, and (vii) local bio-resource based industry. Further clarification on these activities is not provided, but inferences can be made. While the promotion of organic agriculture and solar energy installations is self-evident, walking tourism likely refers to trekking/pilgrimage, and micro hydel projects likely refer to dams that are small and produce less than one megawatt of energy. Items such as “green technology” and “local bio-resource based industry” are less obvious and are presumably aspects of the “zonal master plan” that the notification seeks to work out with the various indicated partners.

### **ECO-ZONES ON THE BHAGIRATHI GANGA: RESIDENTS RESPOND**

When announced, the declaration of the Eco-Zone on the upper regions of the Ganga provoked renewed protests. Those in favor of reinstating the high-altitude dams for reasons of employment generation and the promotion of “development”

in the region organized public rallies to air their grievances. The main hub of this activity was at Bhatwari, the village located near to the Pala Maneri construction site that employed many men from the surrounding area. The chief minister at the time, Vijay Bahuguna, supported the opposition to the Eco-Zone. He claimed that roughly US\$198 million had been spent on the projects as of May 6, 2013, and that neither the return on this investment nor the energy generation capacity of 1,743 megawatts would be realized (Basu 2013). After saying this, he demanded the withdrawal of the Eco-Zone notification in a letter given to the prime minister. His letter, according to one report, claimed that the decision to implement an Eco-Zone was taken without consultations “at the field level,” which is to say, without the input and inclusion of the people living in the region (ibid.).

Later, on June 7, 2013, a group of people who called themselves the Uttarakashi Bachao Sangathan or the Save Uttarkashi committee, gathered outside the government offices known as the Collectorate that are in the center of Uttarkashi. A representative of the group is quoted by Soma Basu (2013), complaining of the adverse impacts the Eco-Zone could have on residents: “The notification will deprive us of electricity and jobs,” said one respondent. “It is being thrust upon us to keep us and the area backward.” In what is likely an empty threat designed to attract the central government’s attention, he went on to remind those gathered that Uttarakhand is an important state bordering China and Nepal. Noting this, he declared, “If the government cannot give us development, we will be forced to seek China’s help” (ibid.).

These comments were especially interesting and somewhat confusing given that they came in the aftermath of a series of floods that devastated the region. The damage caused by the torrential waters prompted many residents of the region to question the validity and feasibility of dam building with renewed rigor. The first flood hit unexpectedly in August 2012 after a cloudburst occurred upstream in the middle of the night. The deluge of water upturned roads, bridges, houses, and took dozens of lives. This initial flood was followed only ten months later, in mid-June of 2013, by an even larger series of floods. The swell of waters, linked with unseasonal amounts of heavy rain, hit the Bhagirathi Valley and the Alaknanda Valley. The second set of floods decimated large tracts of land alongside the Bhagirathi Ganga and the Alaknanda River. Conservative estimates place the loss of lives above five thousand, but people I spoke to who witnessed the devastation claimed a more accurate number might be two or three times that number. Some of these victims were swept away in the deluge, while others



FIGURE 15. Flood Damage in Central Uttarkashi

perished later when water and food supplies were contaminated or made scarce. For instance, plains-based pilgrims, who meant to be in the region only a day or two, fled to the hills only to find that they were not equipped or knowledgeable enough to survive in the forests. Thousands more survived but were stranded in the mountains for weeks; some of them were tourists who had to depend on the kindness of strangers for water, food, and shelter.

As the human and ecological costs were being assessed and mourned, several commentators linked the floods with climate change phenomena and the growing data that suggests the Himalaya will be especially vulnerable to weather pattern fluctuations.<sup>2</sup> The two events, in other words, were presented in several reports as phenomena that may foretell of the “new normal” that looms in the near future. In such projections, the Himalaya will be increasingly vulnerable to extreme weather events such as the heavy downpours and glacial melting that will combine to produce frequent flooding in the summer months. These events will be paired with the opposite problem in the remaining months, as reduced water runoff rates from smaller glacial masses will layer into a scenario of higher-than-average temperatures that will tax existing spring water sources. The result will be a Himalayan landscape that vacillates between having too much and too little water at various points in the year.

After the floods hit, some people softened their stances on the Eco-Zone policy while, as indicated, others maintained their criticism and skepticism for such programs. To understand how and why some people would continue to critique the Eco-Zone despite the obvious ecological precariousness of the region, I turn to several debates and ethnographic encounters. As in previous chapters, the issue of adequate and equitable inclusion in efforts to address the development and conservation equation is critical.

## A RETURN VISIT

Concerned with how friends and acquaintances were faring in the aftermath of the floods, and to understand how people felt about the notification and pending implementation of the Eco-Zone, I traveled back to Uttarkashi in January 2014. Even though I could take the newly opened road over the pass from Mussoorie (as opposed to the road that loosely follows the Ganga’s banks from Rishikesh northward), there were several hair-raising moments on the journey,

and I had some of the most intense moments of fear in my adult life. At certain points, particularly at locations where the path rejoined the Ganga's flow, entire sections of the road appeared to have been bitten off by a fantastical jagged-toothed monster. In other parts of the journey, new segments of road were quickly plowed through the hillside. I held my breath as I watched heavy trucks slowly traverse these unsupported dirt cuttings; several times I thought I saw the ground shift and threaten to give way under their loads. Adding to the distress was the knowledge that many had perished on the journey I now undertook. As I looked down the ravine from the moving taxi, I recalled the ghost stories a seasoned driver once told me about the unsettled souls who perished in road accidents in these mountains only to come back in the night to take more victims by derailing passing cars. This is one of the many reasons so few people are willing to travel the roads once night has fallen. It was much to my relief, then, when the taxi reached Uttarkashi before twilight.

Serendipitously, my trip overlapped with the visit of a committee appointed by the government of India to assess the impact of dams on the Bhagirathi Valley and the role that the project construction may have played in facilitating or augmenting the scope of the devastation caused by the flash floods in June 2013. At stake in the survey was also the fate of twenty-four proposed hydroelectric projects along the (Bhagirathi) Ganga and Alaknanda. If the construction for projects on the high-altitude Ganga could be shown to have exacerbated the damage caused by the floods, then the demand to scrap other dams in the region would grow. The Ministry of Environment and Forests constituted the committee in October 2013 in response to a Supreme Court order. Dr. Ravi Chopra, of an organization known as the People's Science Institute, led the panel of seventeen male members, and soon it was informally referred to as the Chopra committee.

I learned about the committee's visit shortly after I arrived to Uttarkashi. A member and leading activist of Ganga Ahvaan was on the committee, and it was through him that I received brief updates on their activities. Outsiders were not invited to join their surveys up and down the Bhagirathi Valley, but I witnessed some of the highlights by catching up with the committee at key events. On the first evening, for instance, I showed up at a government-run hotel where a select number of people were received to provide testimony about the floods or to air complaints about unreceived compensation. Except for the two other women I went with on the first night, most of the people gathered to discuss the dams

and the post-flood challenges of the region were men. The timing of the meetings was a factor in the gender imbalance as the sun sets early in the winter and women often do not feel comfortable moving about in the dark.

The meetings were not open to the public, so the number of attendees was low. On the first evening event that I attended on January 9, 2014, I counted slightly fewer than fifty people—a meager number compared to how many people were adversely impacted by the floods. When I asked Dr. Chopra why they had not factored daytime open-invite public meetings into their program, he said that such consultations were not a part of their mandate.

## SHADOWING THE CHOPRA COMMITTEE

I rose early the next day to try and observe what I could of the committee's process and to speak with people who sought to air grievances related to the dams and the disasters. My first stop was a town upstream from Uttarkashi. I was told that the Chopra committee was meeting with the villagers at that location to understand how the floods had impacted transportation, tourism, and employment opportunities. When I arrived, I was dismayed to discover that I had missed the morning meeting. The committee members had left earlier than expected to allow more time to travel up the slow-going and destabilized road to the Loharinag construction site. Disappointed, I searched out Lakshmi (one of my key interlocutors from the main period of my research), who lived in a nearby village and is well known as one of the first female village council heads (*gaon panchayat adhyaksh*). To locate her, I called her son who owns a hotel on the main road where the committee had briefly stopped. We met up and he walked me to a nearby house where Lakshmi was visiting relatives who were also active in village politics.

As we walked, her son complained that in the aftermath of the June floods his hotel remained vacant. The poor road conditions and current widespread fear of traveling to the region meant that tourists were no longer visiting the area. He claimed that at the height of the tourist season he could employ twenty-five to thirty people but that he recently let all of them go (save for a few groundskeepers). Lakshmi's son shared this with the committee during their short stop, and he reported that everyone gathered at the meeting had echoed his complaints. As a remedy, they asked the committee to request an immediate reconstruction of the national highway that runs through their village and leads up to the Gangotri



temple. In response, the committee asked for a written statement to be signed by all village council members, and they promised to pick it up on their way back down to Uttarkashi later that evening.

When I met with Lakshmi on the back porch of a building that overlooked the Ganga's flow, she and her relatives were composing the note that would go to the Chopra committee. To the road complaints, they added that provisions should be made to improve "basic infrastructure," which I took to mean the riverbank reinforcements that were in a state of disrepair in many locations. They requested that a concerted effort be made to get the region back on track and support the struggling hill economy. After greetings, introductions, and the obligatory cup of sweet milk tea, Lakshmi and I set off for her house so we could talk as she tended to her grandchildren and prepared the afternoon meal.

I began visiting Lakshmi's house in 2008 and have since spent many afternoons conversing on her back porch, but I was unfamiliar with the small dirt path we took to get from the main road to the village where she and her family live. It took just a few minutes to complete the ascent up a modest slope that led from the cluster of roadside hotels into agricultural land that culminated at a small settlement. Walking through the slightly terraced plots of planted grain, we passed a temple to one of the regional goddesses; Lakshmi simply referred to the goddess as a Durga mandir, possibly because she assumed that I would not understand its significance if she gave me the name of the minor goddess that it housed alongside representations of the iconic Durga (a mother figure associated with Parvati, one of the three main goddesses of the Hindu faith). Uphill and next to the schoolhouse, I could see signs of the temple to the village god, Nag Devta, who is the main protector for most of the houses in the village. A snake god, Nag Devta requires frequent propitiation and, depending on the location of the temple, he often does not allow women to enter his inner sanctum. The placement of the temples, whereby the goddess resides on the exterior of the settlements amid the terraced fields and the male god enjoys a prominent role in the village center, seemed to echo the gendered experiences of the village's inhabitants.

We soon reached Lakshmi's home. The multi-level building was a colorfully painted cement house situated within a cluster of dwellings that range from brick one-room huts to Garhwali-style two-story buildings with slate roofs. When we arrived at the rear entrance, she asked if she could go inside and change her clothes while I sat outside in a small patch of sunlight that offered more warmth than the cool concrete interior of the house. I smiled and nodded,



knowing it was a rhetorical question. Lakshmi had put on a silver-colored sari for her trip to the “market” (the hotels and stores on the road below), and the garment was far too nice for housework. After she disappeared inside, I chatted with four young children on the back porch, which was nestled between an outhouse and a wood hut that housed the neighbor’s livestock.

After about an hour, Lakshmi finally sat down to take what she called an “interview.” Now dressed in a well-worn sari with a red wool cloth tied around the waist and a dark blue wool cloth wrapped around her head, she looked like the other village women moving about. Her transformation was reinforced by the repeated interview-interrupting trips inside to check on the lentils (*daal*) or to tend to the rice. When she did sit still during the half-hour period of our conversation, I noted that her answers were, for the most part, what I would term politically correct. This was what I had come to expect from Lakshmi, given her role in local politics, but somehow on this visit her responses seemed more perfunctory than usual.

To begin, I asked about her thoughts on the dams and their potential repercussions. The question came as no surprise to her since, over the years, she and I mainly discussed topics such as dams, development, and the gendered dimensions of livelihood struggles in the mountains. She replied by saying that the dams caused damage to “nature” (*prakriti*) and that because of them the impact of the floods was exacerbated. I was not sure exactly how she had come to this conclusion; it was unclear if it was based on her own observations, from the talk among villagers, or from exposure to media reports. To explain her reasoning, she asserted that the dams “moved” the mountains and made them unstable from the dynamite blasting and other destructive activities. This, she asserted, set the stage for the floods to be more destructive than what they would have been otherwise. Gesturing down toward the out-of-sight road below, she lamented that now there is no pilgrimage or tourism to the area. Because of this, people are hungry and suffering. Emphasizing that livelihoods come first and foremost, she reminded me that villagers deserve to keep their bellies full “while also maintaining a good environment.”

As if anticipating my next set of questions (and perhaps remembering my line of inquiry from years earlier), Lakshmi stressed that she had nothing against development and that small dams are fine. Stating that “development needs to happen,” she emphasized that she is only against big dams that cause ecological destruction. After all, she explained, people come to the mountains because

the environment they find there can be quite beautiful. We should keep this in mind, she said, and build small dams on the Ganga's streams and tributaries.

I next asked about the Ecologically Sensitive Zone. Lakshmi nodded and looked to the hills in the distance before stating: "In this Eco-Zone, there should be some benefit to the locals." She recalled that no one asked them about the dams before they were built, and she implied that a similar strategy should not be taken for the Eco-Zone. She said this without criticizing G. D. Agarwal or the others who had pushed for the Eco-Zone, but she did caution that the Eco-Zone might take away the freedom of villagers. She explained that if there is no freedom to live independently and to make sovereign decisions about what to build and how to manage the villages, then villagers will not give it consent or be "on board" (*samarthan*). If the Eco-Zone can be demonstrated to be good for the people and the environment, on the other hand, "then we give it our *samarthan*." To this she added a caution: "If it doesn't benefit us, then people may get angry."

After these words, Lakshmi poignantly noted that to date she had received very little information about the Eco-Zone and that she did not know exactly how it would work. This came as somewhat of a surprise to me because, of all the mountain women I knew, she was the one most closely involved in the movement politics that spread from New Delhi up to the mountains. It was even more troubling because, as she explained, the villagers deserve to know how the new plans will impact them. At the time, rumors were spreading that villagers would have to ask permission to build walls, irrigation channels, and new buildings. If this is true, she warned, then that is not right; she repeated that the government must tell people the details about the Eco-Zone if they want people to be in favor (*paksh mein*) of the plan.

At this point, the pressure cooker gave its fourth whistle, signifying to Lakshmi that the daal was ready. She got up to attend to the final meal preparations. While she was in the kitchen, her son came home, possibly in anticipation of lunch. He sat down on the porch in her place and quickly directed the discussion back to the topic of the national highway<sup>3</sup> and how it should be fixed to improve the scope of economic opportunities and the prospects for self-employment (*swarozgaar*). Wanting to steer the conversation away from his preoccupation with the plight of the hoteliers, I asked what opportunities for self-employment there were outside of the service sector. He pointed to several successful agricultural models in nearby areas such as Himachal Pradesh to argue that the production of apples, tomatoes, potatoes, spinach, and grains such as amaranth

(*madua*) could be augmented to harness the economic viability of those crops. At the time that we spoke, many of those products had to be transported to the mountains from Dehradun even though they had previously been grown in Garhwal. Education, he noted as an aside, is also needed to help mountain women and children.

Hearing the comment about women, I noted how hard women work. At this, his tone sharpened; he quickly retorted, “There is no shame in doing hard work” (*shram karne mein koi sharam nahin hai*). He then proudly said that mountain women are strong. Lakshmi returned to the conversation just then, and she chimed in to agree. As we rose to enter the house for lunch, she pointed to a neighbor, a woman who had presumably returned from a trek in the mountains with a large load of fodder on her back. The woman set the load down and began distributing it to her cattle. “See,” Lakshmi declared, “the mountain women are healthy.” By way of example she boasted: “They can eat anything and they don’t get diabetes. They don’t get sick.” Although this latter statement was not true in my observations, I let the comment slide since it was meant to be true relative to what people in urban areas like New Delhi experience. To my surprise, she went on to say that it is mostly the literate women, those with a little bit of education, who complain about life in the mountains. Their heads, she lamented, are full of too many ideas about city living. This comment I also let pass as we had moved into the dining room; it seemed inappropriate to contest the point when I was being shown hospitality.

After the meal, we walked around the neighboring villages in a roundabout way since we had time to pass before heading to the market, where we would meet the Chopra committee on their way back down the mountain. Lakshmi walked ahead of me as we talked, and her body seemed to be a testament to her claims. Well into her sixties, her lithe form moved elegantly uphill over mud and rocks. As I took in the grace of her movements, she hopped up to walk on a narrow concrete strip that was part of the village irrigation system that flowed through terraced fields resplendent with the winter’s crop. Moving swiftly with the agility of a gymnast on a balancing beam, she looked over her shoulder to speak again of the benefits that mountain women get from hard work. I did not reply as my head was down, and I strained to make precise movements while I trailed behind on the thin sides of the irrigation canal. My energies were focused on staying upright and keeping pace.

We spoke with some of the women we met along the way. They greeted Lakshmi warmly and exchanged pleasantries. It was not long, however, before they

started to complain about their health—hands that hurt from arthritis and bodies that suffered from the cold-induced aches resulting from a lack of clothing. I could not make out all that they said in the regional dialect of Garhwali, but their gestures and a few key words in Hindi made their concerns clear enough. Taking in their attire, I noticed that the women wore saris without leggings, and flip-flops with no socks. For the most part, their clothes appeared torn and dirty from the labors of fodder collection, agriculture, and animal caretaking (“husbandry” does not seem to be an apt term given the circumstance). I thought again of Lakshmi and her son’s comments about Garhwali women being strong and wondered if perhaps they were glossing over the physical and emotional costs of these women’s hardships. In the end, I decided that they were trying to stress the dignity of mountain life and the women who contribute to its sustenance. As I reflected on our past conversations, I realized that they were insisting that life could be made easier for mountain men and women alike but that this did not mean their lifestyles should be abandoned.

Departing from the villages, we directed ourselves to the main road that followed the river back down to the market where the Chopra committee would be passing through later that afternoon. After arriving in the center of the market, we saw a group of men gathered on the steps leading up to a hotel that was closed for business. They chatted together amiably and greeted Lakshmi when we approached. She introduced me and we took our seats with the men. We were the only women in the group, a situation that attracted the lingering gaze of other women working in stores or making purchases across the street.

Since we still had more than half an hour before the Chopra committee was scheduled to arrive and collect the signed letter of complaint, I used the time to speak with the men about the dams, the floods, and the impending Eco-Zone. There were approximately eight men present, and when I asked questions they responded in such rapid succession that it made it difficult to discern what they were saying and which statements were most widely held. Since I had been working for years in Lakshmi’s village across the river, I knew that women there asserted that dam building negatively impacted their water supply and hence their livelihoods, so I began by asking the men what they thought about such dams. Several voices responded that it hurt agriculture in locations across the river but not on the market side where we were gathered. This was because the tunnels diverting water out of the riverbed ran underneath the opposite side of the mountains.

What, I asked, of the other dams—the ones further upstream? Was it good or bad that those were canceled? The clear assertion of the majority was that it

was wrong (*galat hua*) that those dams were halted. They spent a lot of money on constructing them, the men said, and the projects were going to give electricity and employment to the region. This seemed an odd assertion given the observations made a few minutes earlier about the impact the operational (but much smaller) dam was having on livelihoods nearby. What, I queried, of the livelihoods that were protected now that the dams were stopped? I could not be sure if it was true or conjecture, but one man made strong assertions that the upstream zone where the dams had been under construction was a “cold” region with little irrigation-driven agriculture. Contending that the crops there are rain-fed, he argued that they would not be impacted by the water diversion. The locational specificities convinced the men that although dams in their backyard were not good, they could be built further upstream without a problem.

When asked, it was made clear that the men were against the decision to implement the Eco-Zone. Like Lakshmi and her son, they claimed that they had very little idea about how it would work but that it did not look promising. “It would hurt us,” the men agreed. “There will be limitations,” said one man; by way of example, he listed potential restrictions on what could and could not be done in the villages once the Eco-Zone was implemented. Since it was a hill region and the residents were accustomed to being more autonomous, he contended that these restrictions would cause problems. I left it at that, reminding myself to ask members of the Chopra committee if these fears matched the reality of what the Eco-Zone would entail.

We all rose to attention when a line of jeeps crept into the market. The vehicles parked off to one side of the road, signaling that the exchange would not take long. Ravi Chopra and the other committee members emerged, greeted everyone gathered with their palms pressed together in a namaste gesture, and accepted the letter amid a flurry of queries and commentary from those living in the market and nearby villages. When pressed for a statement, Dr. Chopra requested that they wait for the report that would come out after their visit. In the meantime, he had to move on to two more meetings for the evening. Fortunately for me, there was a vacant seat in one of the cars, and I was offered a ride back to Uttarkashi. I bid farewell to Lakshmi, thanking her for her time and insight, and climbed inside.

I soon discovered that the second-to-last meeting was at an ashram on the way back down the mountain where a village activist wanted to meet the committee. I had interviewed the person in question in 2009 and was aware of her

extensive work in various campaigns to help mountain women. She held strong views and was averse to the religious discourse of the “Save Ganga” movements. As a result, she preferred to focus on the livelihood needs and wants of mountain residents. I anticipated that her outspoken nature would make for a compelling exchange.

Dusk fell during our fifteen-minute drive downhill, and the number of people and cars we encountered on the road seemed to diminish with each degree of darkening sky. When we stopped, the jeeps parked above the specified ashram, and the group slowly lumbered down a narrow road leading to a set of buildings. We were escorted to a courtyard outside where we were given sweet milk tea and directed to sit in a circle of plastic chairs. After some brief pleasantries and a pointed discussion about who would sit where within the circle, the village activist introduced herself and made several comments she hoped would inform the committee’s assessments. She spoke first of the movements against the dams and emphasized that the villagers were concerned with how the projects might impact their livelihoods. She then outlined the extent of the damage caused by the dam construction and the floods, offering to provide the committee with documentation. The main issue she wanted to discuss, however, was the success of the micro hydel projects in the village above the ashram and in surrounding areas. The village dam of only five kilowatts (which are smaller than megawatts) survived the heavy rains associated with the floods and continued to power between thirty and forty households when the rest of the region was cast into darkness for days. This example, which included commentary on the low environmental impact that such micro projects entail, was meant to urge the committee to take into consideration the range of projects that could be suitable in the mountains and to argue that small dams—projects less than one megawatt—were beneficial and even important for supporting the welfare of mountain residents.

A committee member who labeled himself a technical expert had follow-up questions. The committee composition was designed to include various perspectives in favor of, and against, hydroelectric development; the technical expert was one of those who appeared to be in support of finding ways to promote large dams in the mountains. Ostensibly, for this reason, he took issue with the glorification of small dams. When he pressed the village activist on the dam benefits, he challenged that she herself had stressed that villages need electricity. He contended that if she was making that argument, then their efforts should be concerned

with the electrification of the entire region and not just a few villages. Since small dams cannot achieve this, he went on, then they are not the ideal solution.

The activist pushed back, emphasizing the ways in which micro hydel projects promote “local participation,” regional employment, and energy independence. “Wait, wait,” said the technical expert dramatically, “let me get this down.” He then wrote slowly on his notepad a key term that she had used; as he scribbled, he exaggeratingly enunciated aloud: “Locaaal Par Tee Cee Peh Shun.” This attempt at humor earned a select number of laughs—whether they were genuine or obligatory I could not tell—and he appeared quite pleased with himself. The technical expert then took the opportunity to declare that while participatory schemes sound great, they are in effect narrow-minded. As someone interested in the development of the state and the nation, he said that he was not interested in small measures but in those that are large enough to support the greater good.<sup>4</sup> The activist stood her ground: It is not that we don’t want hydropower, she emphasized, “it is that we do not want the kind of projects that force us to migrate, that ruin our crops, that destroy our forests . . . We are saying that we want the kind of development that puts the people from this region at the center. That is what we are saying.” The technical expert pressed back by suggesting that if the benefit of large hydropower production projects is shared with Garhwali villagers, then perhaps they would not be so opposed to their implementation. In response, the female activist had to reassert that she was concerned about the cost–benefit of the dams in addition to the issues of economic and environmental viability.

The exchange was frustrating to witness. Several subsequent arguments were advanced that seemed designed to manipulate the activist into changing her position. More aggravating still were the technical expert’s feigned attempts at praising the woman as “such a learned person” while trying to undermine her statements. Through it all, the activist stuck to her convictions. But it bears noting that she was a woman with exceptional experience, a high level of education, and a long history of fighting against patriarchal norms in the mountains. As a former member of an organization dedicated to helping women resist discrimination and gendered violence, she was no doubt prepared for the tone of the exchange. Reflecting on this, I imagined how intimidating the scenario would be for many of the up-and-coming female mountain activists.

As we moved on to the next and final gathering of the evening, I continued to observe the gender dynamics of the consultation process. Reconvening some thirty minutes later at the earlier mentioned government-run hotel in the

center of Uttarkashi town, I noticed that, at this second evening event, I was the only woman in attendance in the dining hall where the committee met and conversed with visitors. Many of those in attendance were people who lost land and property in the floods and had yet to receive adequate compensation. At one point in the evening, a friend pointed to some late arrivals and informed me that they were officials from the dam-building company who had come to discuss strategies for remediating the dam sites and closing the open tunnels. These men were better dressed than the other men in attendance, and they were treated respectfully. The exchange was more cordial and jovial than I would have anticipated.

I sat at one of the many tables adjacent to the committee and felt the weight of several stares in my direction. What struck me most, beyond the actual details of the conversation, was the overwhelming sense that the conservation assessment program was as unevenly gendered as the development paradigm had been. Despite the consultations with a few women during the day, it seemed that the policy process was still very much a man's game. Later reflecting on this observation, I recalled how Katy Gardner and David Lewis (1996) once remarked that, since development (and, we can add, conservation) is produced by those in power, the result is that dominant power relations are also often reproduced in the process, "even if unintentionally" (155).

In the report that was eventually produced by the Chopra committee, they concluded that the construction of the hydropower projects in Uttarakhand aggravated the damage caused by the flash floods. They cited the removal of silt, sand, and boulders as acts that enabled the rushing waters to scour the riverbanks. This destabilized the land and emboldened the floods to consume agricultural land and settlements. The report also noted that such dams change river flows and threaten to ruin riverine ecosystems. The committee further recommended that all but one of the twenty-four proposed power projects be scrapped in Uttarakhand because they would have irreversible impacts on biodiversity. The committee also suggested that a national Himalayan policy be developed to formulate a comprehensive plan to protect the region.

There were several critical reactions to the Chopra committee's report. The recommendations were "condemned" by the Central Electric Authority and the Central Water Commission (both energy development agencies that lead India's ambitious program to develop hydropower in Uttarakhand). Claiming that the dams had no role in the Uttarakhand flash floods, a statement noted:



“Blaming hydro projects for an unprecedented catastrophe and halting construction without any technical or scientific basis will seriously impact energy security” (Schneider 2014). The risk of implementing the committee’s recommendations, they asserted, is that India’s ability to expand its hydropower production from 40,000 megawatts to 150,000 megawatts would be severely compromised. The National Thermal Power Corporation, the main body tasked with building the Loharinag Pala and Maneri Pala projects, also criticized the report as the work of “alleged environmentalists” and “so-called activists” (Rajagopal 2014).

## THE POLITICAL ECOLOGY OF EXCEPTIONALISM

In the aftermath of the Chopra committee’s report, G. D. Agarwal reportedly refuted the value of expanding the number of Eco-Zones in Garhwal. Although some people in the nearby Alaknanda and Mandakini basins may look to the Bhagirathi Valley with the hope that their lands would be similarly protected by government orders, he appeared to think that this would be unwise. Noting that there needs to be some room reserved for industries in Garhwal to operate, he is quoted as saying, “It is impractical to turn the entire Garhwal Valley into (an) Eco-Zone. We are not against development. We are for sustainable development” (Basu 2013).

Although it is not stated in the news article, the implication is that G. D. Agarwal and his associates still think of the Bhagirathi Valley and the flow of the Bhagirathi Ganga from the Gaumukh glacial outlet to the district capital of Uttarkashi to be *exceptional spaces* deserving of exceptional treatment (i.e., conservation). Such a stance is in line with comments that figures like G. D. Agarwal had made earlier about the paramount importance for Hindus of maintaining an uninterrupted free-flowing stretch of the sacred river through the Himalaya. On the other hand, however, there are those who believe that the zone upstream from Uttarkashi is a different kind of exception. For the men with whom I spoke in the market with Lakshmi, for instance, upstream dams are ideal for hydroelectric development since that region has relatively less agriculture. These conflicting stances require a more detailed exploration of the politics and political ecologies of exceptionalism along the river in the context of the Eco-Zone debate.

Political ecology is an apt framework for examining exceptionalism because of its long-standing attention to the relationship between geographical specificity and the contours of environmental conflicts. The relatively peripheral locations of some places, and the comparatively weaker levels of influence available to some people, lead some political ecologists to examine the wider contexts of marginality that political ecology can help illuminate (Biersack 2006, 12; see also Watts 2000, 262). To do this, political ecology must take critical orientations to constructions of place and space (Robbins 2004); it also must engage the environmental imaginaries of specific places to situate how they are configured within material and symbolic struggles (Rangan 2000a). In the case of the Ganga, and the Garhwal region through which it flows, our scope of consideration must include issues of cultural and religious exceptionalism as we strive to understand space–place exceptionalism.

These contentious imaginings of the Ganga and its exceptional landscape are related, in part, to colonial and postcolonial politics. In this regard, Partha Chatterjee's (1993) discussion of the material and spiritual realms of anticolonial nationalism comes to mind. When speaking of India's colonial and postcolonial politics, Chatterjee argues that there was a double movement that helps explain the kinds of practices and politics achieved by the anticolonial nationalists. Even though his comments are not oriented toward political ecology, I argue that they are useful for understanding the tensions between the material versus the symbolic and spiritual elements of the dam oppositions that took place along the Ganga. As in the cases that Chatterjee studies, in those movements and countermovements there were efforts to safeguard the "essential" marks of [Hindu] cultural identity" (*ibid.*, 6). I provide here Chatterjee's full commentary for context:

By my reading, anticolonial nationalism creates its own domain of sovereignty within colonial society well before it begins its political battle with the imperial power. It does this by dividing the world of social institutions and practices into two domains—the material and the spiritual. The material is the domain of the "outside," of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an "inner domain" bearing the "essential" marks of cultural identity. The greater one's success

at imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctiveness of one's spiritual culture. The formula is, I think, a fundamental feature of anticolonial nationalisms. (Chatterjee 1993, 6)

As India moved from colonial rule to an independent state, the challenge for nationalists—and eventually the postcolonial administration—was, to phrase it differently, to fashion a “modern” national culture that was nevertheless “not Western” (ibid.) because it maintained an “inner domain” that was still recognizably Indian. The materialist and modernist desires of the postcolonial state, and the desire to be a strong country that could never again be subject to domination, fueled the replication of strategies initiated by the British. For instance, the independent government mostly expanded, rather than transformed, the basic arrangements of colonial law and administration (of the court, the bureaucracy, the police, the army, and the various technical services of government). According to Chatterjee, the constitutional historian M. V. Pylee states with “disarming simplicity” that India inherited the British system of government and administration in its original form. Pylee is even quoted as saying that “the framers of the new Constitution *could not think* [original emphasis] of an altogether new system” (Pylee, quoted in Chatterjee 1993, 15).<sup>5</sup> This criticism is perhaps overstated, but history shows that even Jawaharlal Nehru, the man who became the country's first prime minister following independence, looked to development models he learned about at Cambridge even though he also tried to accommodate some of the visions for small-scale industries and the preservation of cultural traditions that Mohandas Gandhi outlined.<sup>6</sup>

Several of my interlocutors argued that the independent government continued to mimic Western development policies. Despite this past inclination, the case of the dam cancelations on the upper stretches of the Ganga indicates that religious sentiments could be persuasive in opposing some aspects of development policy. For the Ganga, this has involved valorizations of the Hindu beliefs and practices that constitute the “inner domain” of the materially driven “non-West” that the independent government aspires to selectively uphold. In other words, in the era of postcolonial politics, issues of Hindu faith can be, and often are, effectively leveraged to force the national government to rethink its otherwise dominant discourses and practices of development. This means that a political ecology framework must include these more-than-material considerations in its analyses.

Before continuing, allow me to pose a counterargument: Is the case of the Tehri dam, which was ultimately completed, not a refutation of the analysis

about the preservation of outer and inner Hindu cultural domains? As we saw earlier in the example of the oppositions to the Tehri dam, for instance, the logic of dam building on a sacred river appeared insensitive to Hindus who felt that the government had an obligation to honor and respect their religious sensibilities. Why, then, was it not possible to definitively stop the Tehri dam?

As history shows, there are multiple answers. First, the Tehri dam was, in fact, stopped several times on both ecological and religious grounds. Second, the Tehri dam came at a moment in time when there was widespread euphoria around the globe for the promise of hydroelectric development. Third, there was relatively less evidence of the long-term damage that dams cause to ecological systems and hydrological cycles in the Himalaya. Finally, there were significant efforts to discursively disaggregate the Bhagirathi from the Ganga. On this last point, it is worth remembering that dam proponents argued, in defiance of the cosmological geographies laid out in various Hindu epics, that the Ganga begins downstream from Tehri at Dev Prayag, a location where the Bhagirathi meets the Alaknanda. This destabilized the sacred geography arguments against dam building at Tehri. In the case of the three high-altitude dams that followed the Tehri dam, by contrast, the proximity of those projects to the upstream Gangotri temple and the holy town (tirth) of Uttarkashi made it harder to assert that the Bhagirathi tributary is not in fact a part of the Ganga. Thousands, if not hundreds of thousands, of people visit Uttarkashi District each year on their way up to Gangotri (and the nearby glacial snout at Gaumukh), not because they believe they are visiting the Bhagirathi, but because they see, revere, and pray to the river as *the* Ganga.

The dam cancelations and the Eco-Zone implementation, then, were not necessarily about the specific qualities of one stretch of the Bhagirathi Ganga; rather, they were made possible through various pragmatic considerations and the convenient politics of appeasement they enabled (Drew 2014b). After all, when the independent government of India scrapped the three dams along the Ganga's highest reaches in the Indian Himalaya, new data was emerging that most of the dams under operation were underperforming and were at risk for making net losses if the ecological changes underway led to even more erratic river flows. Moreover, since river devotees did not extensively oppose the construction of dams on rivers other than the Ganga, the concessions did not pose a threat to the government's wider orientation toward development and dam proliferation in other parts of the Himalaya.

In Uttarkashi, several of my interlocutors indicated that they were cognizant of the politics in play, including the politics of exceptionalism. Aware of

the river's treatment in other places in India, they noted with some consternation that extra attention was placed on safeguarding the river in their part of the mountains. As the development drama played out, some shifted their stance from calling for and supporting these provisions to contesting their implementation. The schoolteacher I mentioned earlier, who said that the people have the right to the Ganga and that they should take shovels to destroy those "bloody dams," was one of those who eventually changed his tune. When I met with him in January 2014, in the aftermath of the suspended dam construction and the two back-to-back monsoon floods, he contemplated the region's ill fortune. Whereas before he and others thought of the river as an economic and religious boon to Garhwal, he now questioned the overall benefit of living so close to the sacred waters. "What good is this river for us," he asked, "if it is not bringing development—if it is stopping development?" If it is not helping to promote development, he pondered, "then it is no good to us. It has become a curse." Being a devout Hindu and an ardent devotee of the Ganga, he quickly commented on the severity of the word *curse* and noted that he should not use it lightly. In the following sentence, he nonetheless upheld this statement, saying that because of the river "some people have made a political issue of it, a religious issue of it, and have stopped everything." He next contrasted the experience in the Bhagirathi Valley with the situation downstream in places like Kanpur where the Ganga shows high levels of abuse from industrial and commercial wastes. Indicating that this shows a one-sided approach, he asked: "So why put the price of development on a limited area?" If the Ganga is deserving of an Ecologically Sensitive Zone, he argued, then it should be all the way from the glacial spout at Gaumukh to the point where the river meets the Bay of Bengal.

## **PROTECTING THE GANGA: PUBLIC PARTICIPATION VERSUS POLICY DECISIVENESS**

The above critiques are significant, but it bears mentioning that there *are* efforts in play to address the management of the entire Ganga basin. Building on the numerous attempts to "save" the river since the initiation of the first Ganga Action Plan in 1986, the need to formulate a basin-wide approach came to the fore again with the election of Prime Minister Narendra Modi. For the 2013 campaign, Modi positioned himself in Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh, for some of the more publicly visible segments of his party's election campaign. Speaking at a location

not far from the river, he stated his feeling that Ma Ganga called him to Varanasi and that, seeing her current state, he resolved to do everything in his power as prime minister to clean the sacred river once and for all. Reminders of this promise soon appeared after he was elected and Modi set into motion a series of meetings and programs. A proposal was soon sent to the Supreme Court. Skeptical of the efficacy of the suggested measures, the court remarked that the river would not be cleaned for two hundred years if the proposed efforts were instituted.

Anthropologist Kelly Alley, one of the world's foremost experts on the sociocultural and political drivers of the Ganga's pollution, contends that the court's response, combined with the media reports, suggests that the plan is not very different from the failed Ganga Action Plans which, despite limited impact, proved costly (Alley 2014). In a guest blog for the prominent South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers, and People, she focused back in on the problems in Varanasi, pointing out the numerous governance, infrastructure, and energy issues that have persisted and that allow for the rampant release of sewage into the river in one of India's oldest and most iconic cities. Surveying the current situation, which does not appear to have changed significantly since the release of Alley's book in 2002, she lambasts the corruption and incompetence that has allowed the Ganga to remain so highly polluted. Reflecting on the challenges, and in a spirit aligned with the insights in this book, she calls for more participatory governance. "A competent authority," writes Alley, "should connect central, state, and municipal levels and be accountable to the residents of the city not just through the municipal corporations and its elected officials, but also directly through norms of participatory governance. These reforms should include clearly defined norms of transparency, accountability, and participation that pertain to the entire system and to each component part" (Alley 2014, n.p.).<sup>7</sup>

I agree with Alley and other engaged anthropologists who have written on similar topics to argue that inclusive and participatory processes are incredibly important (Checker 2005; Hale 2008; Holland et al. 2010; Osterweil 2013; Speed 2008). In addition to promoting critical discussions about governance, participation is significant for mobilizing long-term civic activism and public engagement in the policy process. A lack of inclusion, on the other hand, can lead to decisions to withdraw from public discussions and debates.

As a case in point, I would like to consider Sarita's comments when I was finally able to meet up with her in July 2012, after the first failed attempt outlined in the interlude. When we spoke, Sarita reiterated her distaste for the policy processes that had been put in place without including her, her fellow dam

opponents, and her neighbors. After contemplating the ways residents were pushed out of the decision making, she commented that in the end, no one took notice of the particularities of their demands or even remembered them as the people who did “good work” for the Ganga. Feeling bypassed, at the time of our meeting Sarita commented on what seemed to be the futility of her efforts. She recalled how earlier people had made fun of her when she went from village to village opposing the dams. She also lamented the time and energy she put into explaining her position on the projects. These recollections brought back the bitter sting of the risks she took to make a stand for the Ganga’s unfettered flow.

Wondering about the implications of these memories, I asked her what her thoughts were on the movement as a whole. “What can I say?” she replied. “I participated in it before but I don’t have the strength for it anymore.” To punctuate this, she gripped her hands around her thin yet muscular forearms and looked back toward the house where an undoubtedly endless set of tasks awaited her. This fatigue, and the reluctance to take part in addressing future efforts to question development programs, is of grave significance. It recalls the comments of the women who were once active in the famed Chipko and the subsequent disdain they revealed to those who questioned them on the legacy of the movement.

Sarita’s concerns about the limited movement recognition and the lack of inclusion in policy debates serve as a warning against the repetition of similar failures moving forward. Whether the issue is cleaning up the Ganga, stopping dams on the sacred river, or implementing Eco-Zones, there is a need to expand the scope and extent of discussion, dialogue, and debate. This is a caution that a journalist from Uttarkashi made clearly when I asked his thoughts on the policy reversal. Reflecting on his long-term coverage of the development conflict, he first criticized the movement leaders before lambasting the exclusions of the policy process.

As an example, he pretended for a moment that I was one of the high-profile figures from outside of Uttarkashi that was active in the dam opposition movement. “You,” he said pointing at me, “opposed the dams.” After that, the projects were stopped and things were left in a “pack up [and leave] as is” condition. This, he implied, was not particularly favorable to the people living nearby. After this “win,” he queried, “Did you follow up? Did you try to see how those people were impacted? No,” he argued, now wagging his finger admonishingly, “you did not ‘follow’ [up].” He went on to explain: “And when one does not pursue due diligence, then the public will look at the caverns, to the cut rocks on the hillside, and to the unfinished development. The public will feel abandoned. Then, the

next time someone else comes to town to say that a new dam or some other project is beneficial, they will stand with them. If enough people make that decision, then perhaps after some time the projects will resume. *That*," he emphasized, "is also possible."

The journalist made these observations after seeing this sort of shift in public sentiment in numerous past cases when people ended up feeling misled. For him, the lack of follow-through in the movement processes applies to the way people have gone about implementing the Eco-Zone. The biggest "drawback" of those who were against the projects and in favor of the Ecologically Sensitive Zone, he cautioned, is that they have not been able to adequately communicate the program to the public. They haven't been able to show the masses the "positive" side of the initiative. This is a problem because, in his view, Eco-Zones can be beneficial. If correctly applied, they may be able to check the scale of unsound development practices and lead to more secure building practices and better public safety. For the journalist, the issue was not the fact that the Eco-Zone would be implemented—this was something he welcomed; rather, the problem was the way that it was decided.

To correct this, the journalist argued that there is a need for open debate among everyone involved in, and potentially impacted by, such policies: Such debate needs to incorporate the people in support and in opposition. This includes the mountain residents affected by the project and the village leaders, as well as the technical specialists. They should gather in one forum (*ek manch*) and debate what should happen. They should discuss the bad and the good. They can say: "This is wrong for this reason and this is right for this reason." Then they can take suggestions from the public. Such an approach is critical, he argued, because "there is no lack of understanding in the mountains. Everyone understands. But the problem is that those in power are not ready to listen to their thoughts and to their problems. The policy makers, sitting up on high, they decide on policies based on what influential people and companies tell them they want." He then challenged me to imagine what happens next, before jumping in to say that, obviously, those policies do not gain support. He continued with a rhetorical "Why not?" before answering, "Because no one listened" to the mountain voice. The journalist elaborated:

This is human nature . . . [Let's say] You come to me to talk about something. I have my own view. And in addition to me you've spoken to someone else and have been convinced by them. So I at first supported you but since someone else convinced you, I am now against you. Without speaking to you further, [I do this]



on my own. That is the condition here. People for this reason usually stand in opposition [to policies] because no one is ready to listen to them.

The criticism, and the skepticism it reflects, is a reminder that the processes through which policies have been generated to manage the Ganga in the Bhagirathi Valley have been inadequate. This can result in mistrusting attitudes that have long-term implications.

## **FLIPPING THE PERSPECTIVE: URBAN ECO-ZONES AND LIVELIHOOD-CENTRIC MOUNTAIN POLICIES**

In reviewing the content of this chapter, a critic might ask why I have given so much attention to resident's concerns about Eco-Zones in the Bhagirathi Valley when they only represent a sample of the people living in the mountains. In response, and as I have indicated, these are significant because they point to long-standing concerns. While the Eco-Zone might be successfully executed on paper, the comments of my interlocutors indicate that it will likely face numerous challenges on the ground. If, over time, the Eco-Zone is deemed to have restricted the development desires and aspirations of mountain residents, then it could inspire another regional backlash to the conservation impulse that might entail more pro-dam campaigns—a radical pendulum swing back to the right.<sup>8</sup> This would continue to hinder and tarnish much-needed conversations about culturally and regionally appropriate resource management strategies. I am not alone in expressing such cautions. There is a growing body of literature that warns against insufficiently engaging with the people who might be impacted by conservation zones, including nature parks (Brockington 2002; Brockington, Duffy, and Igoe 2008; Büscher 2013; Fletcher 2010; Heatherington 2012; Hussain 2015; West 2006; West, Igoe, and Brockington 2006).<sup>9</sup>

Beyond the issues of inclusion and representation in the policy process, an underlying concern is that Eco-Zones are ultimately limited responses to dire systemic problems. When they are designed in faraway urban centers that voraciously consume Himalayan resources, such policies smack of not only hypocrisy but also a failure to comprehensively engage state-sponsored demands for growth in unsustainable capitalist markets. Unless growth models are configured to make do without the overexploitation of mountain resources, the partitioning of specific sites will do little to protect the entire region. While there can and should be regionally appropriate development models, the approaches taken should not omit the larger

spatial dimensions of the equity and sustainability equation. To flip the dominant perspective, it may be more productive to start examining how urban centers such as New Delhi could be the target of Ecologically Sensitive Zones rather than the relatively benign Himalayan regions. This somewhat wistful notion would heed the cautions of scholars such as Wolfgang Sachs (see Sachs et al. 1998) who argue that it is important to work toward greening the North, a word often used to flag the group of industrialized countries that, in the latter half of the twentieth century, were located predominantly in the Northern Hemisphere. This terminology continues in use, but it commonly refers to parts of the world with high levels of consumption. New Delhi now shares many elements common to other industrialized cities around the globe, showing the contemporary difficulty of identifying the parameters of “North” and “South.” Within New Delhi’s vast disparities between rich and poor residents, there exist high and uneven levels of water and energy use. Much of the resource use is often disassociated from its origins, a fact that can impact how urban residents perceive and manage the items on which they depend.

Consider that in Noida, for instance, much of the tap water is actually from the Ganga (and in some instances, it accounts for 100 percent of piped supplies).<sup>10</sup> It is thus feasible to imagine that every day thousands of self-identified Hindus arise each morning in places like Noida to defecate in the Himalaya-sourced Ganga waters they knowingly or unknowingly find in their toilets before turning on the tap, washing in the very same gangajal, and then applying a different version of the water—possibly sourced from a container of water obtained while on pilgrimage to Haridwar or Gangotri—in ritualized practices of worship to various gods and goddesses (potentially including the Ganga herself). This sort of inconsistency is part and parcel of not just the anomalies of everyday practice (Shove 2003), or perhaps even everyday religious practice (Orsi 1997, 2012), but also the quirks of metropolitan notions of environmentalism. As Amita Baviskar (2005) points out, college students living in Delhi and Mumbai at the turn of the second millennium were more likely to participate in urban rallies against prominent causes such as the opposition to the Narmada Valley dams than to reflect critically on changing their own resource use patterns. These skewed orientations to the spatial realms of practice and activism can end up “reproducing rather than changing structural inequalities that create ecological degradation in the first place” (Baviskar 2005, 173; see also Mawdsley 2004).

Consider, too, that in nearby Gurgaon, a sprawling pop-up city that houses countless multinational corporations and expatriate residents on terrain that was formerly some of the richest agricultural land in the region, most of the new housing and industrial developments are on plots with virtually no access to

groundwater or a consistent municipal supply. Thus, it is very common for the well-to-do Gurgaon residents to suffer regular water shortages and water rationing despite their wealth. Many of these residents end up paying high rates for water tankers to distribute resources to their homes on a weekly or biweekly basis to meet basic household needs. What is more, all around Gurgaon there are clusters of Special Economic Zones that enable tax breaks and other incentives for commercial endeavors that engage with global markets while simultaneously draining the groundwater beneath their land and hindering adjacent agricultural livelihoods. The result is a “unique enclave” governed by legal and tax environments that transcend national laws with a free market orientation (Bedi 2013, 38) while depending on, and exploiting, resources that people with relatively less mobility desperately need.<sup>11</sup> These examples are indicative of the seemingly uneven logics operating in the “new India” that Siddhartha Deb outlines evocatively in his *Beautiful and the Damned* (2010) and that Arvind Adiga describes in *White Tiger* (2008). Ultimately, the shortsighted planning evidenced in such metropolises caters to the whims of glittering financial flows, leaving the poor and marginalized to fend for themselves in places both near to, and far from, flourishing urban centers.

What I want to point out here is the contradiction between creating Ecologically Sensitive Zones in the relatively benign Himalaya while simultaneously expanding Special Economic Zones in the downstream urban centers that benefit, at least to some extent, from the material and spiritual resources found in the mountains. These exclusionary logics (and exceptional practices) show evidence of a partitioning of resources in ways that are ultimately foolhardy. The Eco-Zones in the Himalaya, after all, will do little to safeguard “the environment,” especially when the kinds of schemes enabled by Special Economic Zones allow the rampant exploitation of ecological and human resources at a potentially greater rate. These exclusions do make sense, however, if one returns one last time to Chatterjee’s cautions about the pre-independence and post-independence nationalist logics. These aspire to preserve a culturally robust “inner domain” (represented by Himalayan Eco-Zones and the protection of the Ganga) at the same time as they pursue the economic, social, and symbolic capital valued in the “outer domains” of materialist accumulation (symbolized by the Special Economic Zones).

Calls to examine the unsustainable practices found in India’s metabolic centers are challenges to critically reflect on the scalar disparities of how resources are used and who benefits from their use; this is ultimately a political ecology

perspective. My use of this field of research includes questions of culture, religion, economy, and ecology, and it also underscores the importance of livelihoods. It is the concern for livelihoods, a prevailing concern in the “environmentalism of the poor” (Martinez-Alier 2005), that brings the discussion full circle. Men and women protested the construction of dams on the Bhagirathi Ganga when they thought that their livelihoods were at stake. This included the lifeways that involved everyday interaction and religious ritual with the river’s free flow and the perpetuation of the service industry economy enabled by tourism and pilgrimage activities. When the dams were canceled and the roads and projects fell into a state of disrepair, however, livelihoods were again seen as being at risk. Before and after the 2012 and 2013 floods, tourism diminished and employment opportunities were reduced. Access to a free-flowing river was safeguarded, but it came with the imposition of an Eco-Zone that restricts human activity. This is what caused another temporary change in opinion. It was amplified by feelings of distrust for the urban environmentalists and plains-based Hindu notions of the Ganga’s significance that threatened to obfuscate the regional stakes at hand. As Baviskar notes, such tensions are important to engage because they illuminate how movement politics can “further disenfranchise the most powerless” (2005, 172). This sets an ill-advised precedent for future mobilizations.

The observation of changing discourses, practices, and activist stances should not be taken as evidence that faith in the Ganga diminished as the development drama unfolded. It also does not mean that the sentience of the goddess Ganga became inconsequential. Rather, as livelihoods were increasingly jeopardized, additional discourses about the Ganga’s agency began to surface. This included commentary that, in the final count, the goddess Ganga may be better off to provide her own safeguards than the mortals with relatively less capacity to impact change. Following this logic, some of the people who once felt it their duty to defend the Ganga ended up contemplating that, since the goddess is powerful and omniscient, the time had perhaps come to focus on self-preservation. This move provides more evidence of how religious belief plays a role in shaping the politics of ecology, especially in cases when the question of “ecology” includes a landscape populated by sentient beings.

# EPILOGUE

## Development and Livelihoods in the Himalaya

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*"All by itself, water is supremely fluid, fluctuating, fleeting. We mix language, gods, bodies, and thought with water to produce the worlds and the selves that we inhabit."*

LINTON 2010, 3

**F**RAMED AROUND THE NOTION of promoting "river dialogues," this book examined what the Ganga means to different people living across a range of distinct geographical, socioeconomic, and religious domains of interaction. I focused on how some people see the role that hydroelectric development can play in the Himalayan reaches through which the Ganga flows, and I highlighted the specific concerns that mountain men and women have for the river and its associated goddess. In this exploration, I presented the cultural politics that inspire contestations over the utility of dams and the relevance of a political ecology that considers the Ganga to be a multiply interpreted entity subject to various cultural, religious, and political uses. The discussion points to the need to examine the beneficiaries of certain projects and programs and to understand why seemingly advantageous schemes, such as the expansion of Ecologically Sensitive Zones, would be subject to dispute among Himalayan residents. A related aim has been to inject the discussion of development and conservation along the Ganga's Himalayan flow with more nuance than is often presented in the press and in public debates.

My inclusion of multiple perspectives, paired with the shifting fields of action and agency demonstrated by my interlocutors, means that I have not relied only on religious studies, development studies, environmental studies, or even anthropological studies to explain the conflicts. This syncretic approach is part of a larger trend in environmental anthropology to complicate rather than simplify

our studies, as well as our analyses. As Eleanor Shoreman-Ouimet and Helen Kopnina (2011) contend in their introduction to *Environmental Anthropology Today*, this is an important move: “The time has come for ethnographies to be more complicated—they need not stick to one side or one cause” (ibid., 20). Instead, the authors continue: “They can depict cultural reality and reveal conflicting truths. In fact, it is hard to imagine a community in which individuals’ actions or agendas don’t somehow contradict the group’s larger environmental, social, political, or religious ideologies . . . Such ethnographic simplification, in short, ignores human agency in both the negative and positive aspects of environmental preservation” (ibid.). The call is for scholars to expand the scope of inquiry and explanation in ethnographic studies so that we can capture complexity as well as contingency.

In this epilogue, I have three aims. The first is to restate clearly the position on dams along the Bhagirathi Ganga that I developed through the course of my fieldwork, and in the process of post-fieldwork writing, discussion, and reflection. The second is to briefly touch on the degree to which ecological change predictions may alter stances such as the ones that some of my interlocutors and I came to take on dam building in the Himalaya—a point of concern about which readers may be curious. The discussion I offer continues to take seriously the cultural and religious influences that shape how these issues are approached. The third and final aim is to emphasize the importance of livelihoods and the need to keep such issues front and center. I follow this latter point by returning to the lives of several key interlocutors whose stories I shared. I call this an “epilogue” because it deals with the implications of the text and the future trajectories that may emerge. This open-ended tone differs from the tone of a conclusion, which often tends to be more definitive.

## **DAMMING THE HIMALAYA: “LET IT NOT BE YOUR FIRST CHOICE”**

Let me begin with the first aim: What, one may ask, is my position on dams along the Ganga after years of ethnographic investigation? The answer is straightforward but it merits some disclaimers. As I indicated in the introduction, I began my research with a strong, self-assured position that hydroelectric dam building in the Himalaya is, in almost all cases, a bad idea. I considered this position to be supported by the data of nongovernmental organizations and environmentalists that I engaged with before, and shortly after, arriving to “the field” in North

India. At first, the comments of my interlocutors seemed to vindicate this position. The women who cried in response to dam building on the Ganga were a moving, emotional sight, and their utterances informed my initial writing on the topic, which was adamantly opposed to hydroelectric projects in the Himalaya. Once the three contested dams on the highest reaches of the Bhagirathi Ganga were canceled, however, and after many of these same interlocutors began criticizing the process by which this took place (and its implications for mountain livelihoods), my stance softened. Thus, I now contend that a useful position that anthropologists can adopt is one that facilitates conversations about the range of impacts that development projects might have. Our interlocutors should ideally drive these discussions, as they are the people who must live with the long-term effects of whatever policies are implemented.

In giving emphasis to the thoughts, demands, and actions of the people living in the shadow of development projects, it is important to allow room for their positions to shift and potentially transform (Brosius 1999). The ways and means through which opinions modify can be telling on numerous levels. In the case of dam building on the Bhagirathi Ganga, it is my sense that, in the aftermath of the 2012 and 2013 floods, most of my interlocutors are now resigned to the fact that the Bhairon Ghati I and II, Loharinag Pala, and Pala Maneri projects were canceled. Future dams along the river will likely be washed away if flooding reoccurs on the scale that was witnessed two summers in a row. These interlocutors would, however, like to see the sites remediated, they would like to see micro hydel projects built on the tributaries of the Ganga, and they would like to see state and federal governments implement measures to promote economic opportunities in the region, alongside disaster mitigation strategies. Or, to put it in Lakshmi's words from our first meeting on July 28, 2008: "They should open small industries. They should make small dams on small streams. They should expand solar options and wind options. In this way, we can have development and our Ganga Ma will not be affected."

Taking the above into consideration, I now take the position on dams that Ramaswami Iyer offered in chapter 1 when he stated: "I am not saying that no dam should ever be built. I don't take an extreme position on this; some people do. All I am saying is, 'For heaven's sake, be very careful about it. *Let it not be your first choice* [my emphasis].'" Whereas the statement initially struck me as accommodating of what I considered a hegemonic development agenda, I now see wisdom in this stance. Yes, there is plenty of information that shows how destructive and exploitative hydroelectric development can be, and the evidence is particularly concerning when it comes to mountain regions. This data is sig-

nificant, and it should be heeded to whatever extent possible. That said, there might be a role for small dams in *some* locations of the Himalaya (and elsewhere) so long as all other options are also considered and ultimately deemed less advantageous. And as previously noted, such projects should be undertaken in sustained engagement and conversation with the impacted populations and, ideally, these people should have ownership in the development process and the economic benefits that may accrue.

The observation that some smaller dams are desirable to some Himalayan residents speaks to the degree to which one can or should include complicated and mixed development aspirations. This pushes against some of the work that was critical of development, and which suggested that notions of development as they are commonly presented and enacted represent a neocolonial effort to subjugate others and to profit from exploiting the “under-developed” parts of the world under the auspices of beneficence (Escobar 1995; Esteva 1992, 2010; Rist 2002; Sachs 1992). While I owe an intellectual debt to these “post-development” arguments and their authors, I am also influenced by another set of scholars—many of them writing from the context of South Asia—who are putting the issue of agency at the fore of the conversation. The question of agency is linked to emergent development desires. It is now at the heart of significant debates in environmental anthropology and development studies (de Vries 2007; Gupta 1998; Li 2007; Pigg 1992; Sinha 2003). How, such scholars ask, do we understand and represent the ways that people (including “peasants” and “sub-alterns”) appropriate, modify, and leverage development discourse in ways that complicate notions of dominance and hegemony? These scholars aim to reinstate multiple levels of agency in relation to development and to revise notions that development institutions are all-powerful in their dominance over the cultural pluralities that they encounter.<sup>1</sup> They also challenge the notion that “Western modernity” and postcolonial cultures somehow encapsulate separate and antagonistic categories.<sup>2</sup> A goal in this work is to examine how actors adapt to, or seek to modify, development practice. This is a facet of investigation included in this book.

## CONSERVING THE HIMALAYA WHILE LISTENING FOR DIFFERENT STORIES

Issues of agency are fine, some may argue, but do people always know what is in their best interest? Let us bypass the elements of knowledge superiority implicit



in that statement to think with the wider ecological context in which even small dams are situated in the Himalaya. This point, and the effort to think about the floods that first hit Uttarkashi in 2012 and then later in 2013, leads me to address the second aim of this epilogue. While it is unclear the extent to which the cloudbursts and heavy rains that initiated these floods are linked with climate change, such meteorological phenomena are expected to grow in number and frequency in Himalayan regions as the ecological impacts of anthropogenic climate change continue.<sup>3</sup> Given the likelihood that these incidents will flood mountain rivers and destroy riverside infrastructures, one could ask if it makes sense to expand development projects of any size, small or large. In response, I argue that the possibilities for more flash floods and erratic weather patterns may push back on a few of the development arguments of my key interlocutors so that, in some places, seemingly viable projects are deemed impractical. This is where the value of specific and original (as opposed to cut-and-paste) environmental impact assessments becomes more evident than ever. If such studies deem the project unsound, then that data may perhaps counter the push for small dams on specific Himalayan tributaries.

While empirical studies have their merits, we must also be vigilant to not let scientific epistemologies overdetermine the lenses we employ and the responses that we create. In many ways, the goal is also to understand how people perceive climatic changes in socioculturally specific ways (Norgaard 2011; Shove 2003) while also listening for “different stories,” as Julie Cruikshank (2005) suggests, about the myriad forces that people believe are linked with the dynamics of change. This point is underscored by the fact that for many residents in the Himalaya the science of “climate change” has only recently begun to gain purchase. Even among those who know of its definition, many may still consider additional “nonscientific” epistemologies when determining the reasons for change, as well as the appropriate responses.

Consider, for instance, that based on my documentation the number of discourses circulating in Uttarkashi about climate change (or *jalvaayu parivartan*) began its largest increase in the summer of 2009 and has since continued to grow (Drew 2012b). Besides the social movement participants who were previously sensitized to the climate discourses through environmental programming, I found that Uttarkashi’s well-educated residents began talking about climate change without my prompting at approximately this time. These were often the business owners, teachers, and middle-class families with access to cable television. They read the newspapers and watched coverage of environmental issues

on various national and international channels. When I spoke with such people, I asked them to clarify what climate change entailed. These interlocutors associated the term with a rise in temperature and a lack of snowfall in the Himalayan winters. They were also aware of the global inequities associated with climate change phenomena. Media coverage of the climate summit at Copenhagen in 2009 was particularly influential; it educated people about the tensions between the “developed” countries emitting the bulk of the world’s carbon emissions and the “developing” countries that defended their rights to economic growth even if it meant increasing emissions levels. These reports thus sensitized people to the “geopolitics” of climate change (Doyle and Chaturvedi 2010), a term used to criticize attempts to “deterritorialize” the phenomenon’s historical drivers and spatial disparities.

Although influential, the climate change predictions did not displace the ideas that many Garhwal residents held about the Ganga’s agency. In fact, many people in the movements merged the climate discourses they became exposed to with their own ontologies of the Ganga and of the power of regional gods. Nirmala’s poem, featured in chapter 2, is an example of this merging. Her composition, which she shared with me after attending Dr. Vandana Shiva’s 2009 climate change meeting in Uttarkashi, shows how the environmental epistemologies impacted her thinking when she lamented the potential loss of the Gangotri glacier. The discourse about glacial retreat, however, did not dampen her belief in the power of the goddess Ganga; rather, Nirmala blended environmental-scientific and religious epistemologies. In 2009, this synthesis allowed her to call for the river’s conservation and protection while also cautioning that “Ganga will definitely show her furious side” if people do not act in her interest. Years later, Nirmala expressed a deep sadness about the devastation of the August 2012 and June 2013 floods, but she also conveyed a sense of vindication that her words were premonitions of things to come. Mother Ganga, she cautioned, is displeased with the treatment she has received and is trying to show her devotees their errors by wiping aside the projects they have implemented in ignorance and disrespect.

There were numerous other indications that people incorporate climate science with their own understandings of the goddess’s agency and her ability to respond to human behavior.<sup>4</sup> One activist adamantly demanded that tourism up to the glacial snout at Gaumukh be completely stopped. She argued that, as more people go up to the glacier for adventure or to beg for their salvation, ever more cars and bodies travel near to, and pollute, the fragile ice. Although

a cap was already in place that restricted the per day number of visitors to 150, this activist undertook a one-woman campaign to stop all movement past the temple at Gangotri, some 24 kilometers (15 miles) below the glacier. She argued that visitors litter the trails and pollute the area, and she even asserted that some of the foreign tourists and for-profit pilgrims (who are paid to bring holy water from the glacier to urban residents) harm the integrity of the ice mass by bringing up “impure” foodstuffs, such as meat and alcohol. She and others imagined that these goods reduced the holy atmosphere around the glacier, angered the goddess Ganga, and caused her to recede out of displeasure with human conduct. In an account given by a religious ascetic who used to live in Gangotri, for instance, the goddess once became so infuriated by meat consumption at Gaumukh that she broke off a large chunk of the glacier. This incident, purportedly from the late 1990s, created a surge of water that enveloped and killed the meat-consuming people picnicking nearby.<sup>5</sup> There are, in other words, issues of ethical and moral responsibility that my interlocutors address in their comments, and in their perceptions of the drivers of change.

These examples indicate how notions of the Ganga’s agency are melded with the science of climate change. They also show variation in how people understand the challenges at hand. In some cases, people include their faith in the omniscience and omnipotence of the divine in their understandings of the climate science to which they are exposed. The comments of several interlocutors, in fact, assert that the gods are allowing humans to destroy the planet to teach us a lesson about proper conduct and the repercussions for sin and moral degeneracy. This is, after all, what is foretold in the Hindu cycles of time; in the current age of Kali yug, which lasts thousands of years, the world is wrought with signs of internal and external decay. Yet, if humans can turn the tide of physical pollution and the internal states of corruption that it signals, then the gods have the ultimate power to take back the reigns and correct the ecological balance. As many of my interlocutors contended, in this age of “evil” (that is Kali yug), the gods have given us one major boon: those who seek divine guidance and transcendence can find it faster in this epoch than in the other three cycles of time.<sup>6</sup> The implication is that the onus is on us all to collectively adopt the upstanding behavior that could bring about this change. This internal redirection, as some commented, cannot be forced through policy alone.<sup>7</sup>

What I want to stress is that people are starting to consider more of the climate science even as they simultaneously continue to believe in the sentient beings that animate the landscapes in which they live. This illustrates the multiple and evolving knowledges that influence perceptions about ecological transfor-

mations. These dynamics of change are part of the cultural politics at play because they inform behavior and the struggles over resources.

Cultural politics, however, do not tell us the entire story about how decisions are made or about the reactions that they inspire. For this, we need to envelop cultural politics into political ecology—the study of the scalar, spatial, and power differentials that inform resource conflicts. In cases where “resources” are religiously revered, there is a scope to include religion into our analyses. A religiously attentive and practice-influenced political ecology that incorporates cultural politics is important because anthropological investigations must attend to the ever-evolving nature of the meanings, epistemologies, and ontologies that people produce, even when focusing on something as seemingly secular as a development conflict. This is particularly important in the case of the Ganga’s management because, as I have shown, the river means many things to many people. The values associated with the sacred river, the degree of importance that people attach to the Ganga’s waters, and the extent to which people are willing (or not willing) to allow it to be manipulated are constantly in flux and are repeatedly being put into dialogue. It is for this reason that any attempt to treat it solely as a natural resource, or as a predominantly religious entity, will falter. Past studies of its contestation have tended to vacillate between these frames, leaving out the possibilities of understanding how people who exert agency amid structural constraints relate to the river in everyday life.

This is the danger of creating Ecologically Sensitive Zones that do not adequately engage the desires and concerns of the people living within their bounds; there is the risk, one we have seen in this book, of robbing people of symbolic capital, or the power to make *distinctions*.<sup>8</sup> This is critical because it is the act of making distinctions that influences how, and by whom, decisions are made. In several ways, my interlocutors have argued that they should, by rights of residence and everyday connectivity to the river, have the symbolic capital to influence how the Ganga is used. Although they do not use the term, the theft of their symbolic capital amounts to symbolic violence. This violence is enacted when the state takes over the power to represent the “‘legitimate’ social world” and works to enforce this vision (Mahar, Harker, and Wilkes 1990, 13). Underneath such acts of symbolic violence are pressing issues of exclusion and inadequate social representation in policy decisions that can have long-term implications if left unexamined and unaddressed.

Of course, the augmentation of regional discourses about how development could or should be in the Garhwal Himalaya does not mean these distinct visions will be translated into action. As Antje Linkenbach (2007) cautions, it is

perhaps naïve to assume that centralized decision making will ever adequately consider “local demands” given the existing political structures and uneven constellations of power (300). That said, and as Linkenbach (*ibid.*) also notes, the creation of a public space of discussion is a necessary requisite for creating the “conditions of listening” that Richard Burghart (1996) has identified as critical for decision making based on his work in the Nepali Himalaya.<sup>9</sup> Over time, enhanced conditions of listening can make way for more expanded conversations in the mountains and improve the potential that more varied perspectives will impact regional and national debates.

## HIMALAYAN LIVES, HIMALAYAN LIVELIHOODS

Regardless of the policy decision at hand, it should not be forgotten that people still live in the Himalaya and that the continuity of their livelihoods is at stake. It is this concern that brings the discussion back full circle. The case studies that emerge from the region can offer numerous opportunities to test and expand academic theories; at the same time, it is important to continually ground discussions in the urgent struggles for daily existence. Even though people like Sarita and her husband once declared they were ready to give their lives for the sake of ensuring the Ganga’s free flow, for instance, this declaration softened and slipped away when livelihoods were impacted by the stalled dam construction. I do not think they should be faulted for this change of position; rather, I contend that there are valuable lessons in their revised stance. Taking into consideration the multiple concerns for the Ganga’s management, the proposed solutions should focus on the actions that will help people in the Himalaya survive and even prosper amid the coming socioeconomic and ecological changes. This cannot be done in pockets, one Eco-Zone at a time; what is needed is a comprehensive, inclusive effort.

It is with a nod toward the significance of engaging regional perspectives on development that I wish to close out the discussion by returning to the women featured. For some of them, their involvement in efforts to “save” the Ganga was transformative; it led to a reconfiguration of their sense of self and how they feel themselves to be perceived as “someone who can speak” about important matters. For others, movement involvement was but a blip on the proverbial screen, a passing moment of struggle in a life full of hard work and turmoil. To provide a sampling of updates, I share what Sarita, Nirmala, and Radhika were experiencing when I saw them in the post-dam aftermath of January 2014.

Like the experiences of many women living in rural areas, Sarita's daily rhythms are still based on a seemingly endless set of chores that begin in the early morning hours. Like other rural women, her livestock tending, fodder collecting, and meal preparing activities are complicated by the frequent care of grandchildren left under her watch. Unlike other women of her age and background, however, Sarita is active in the top leadership of localized women's committees, and she remains active at meetings where efforts are made to address and modify village problems and regional policies. These efforts take place even as Sarita continues to practice daily acts of reverence and worship to the Ganga at the river's banks. While she is no longer interested in taking part in the dam opposition activities, she still hopes that the Ganga will continue to flow with enough water to support the cultural and livelihood practices that are so meaningful, even vital, to the people of Garhwal. Whereas before she thought the three high-altitude dams would impinge on historically important ways of connecting to the Ganga, and to the landscape, she has since softened her position.

Nirmala, living in a location slightly uphill from semi-urban Uttarkashi, continues her life much the same way as she did before the dam opposition campaigns. The projects were never a threat to her daily practices nor those of her neighbors, but she nonetheless saw danger in the ways the dams would impact the lifeways upstream. She also worried about the sanctity of the everyday religious acts that she and others regularly undertake if the Ganga's flow was disrupted. Her concern was that an interrupted Ganga would no longer be free flowing and aviral. She feared that a disrupted Ganga would hold less ritual and spiritual power.

When she reflects on the movement, Nirmala looks back fondly on the campaigns as a time when she was able to speak her mind and make her concern and love (*prem*) for the Ganga known to those who would listen. She continues to compose poems and songs about the Ganga, and she practices her repertoire of melodies as often as she is able. These practices are at times hampered by the onset of mystery stomach ailments that often lead to hospitalization in Uttarkashi and in locations downstream, such as Rishikesh or Dehradun. Nirmala finds solace in knowing that, whatever happens to her, she has done service or *seva* for the Ganga and that the goddess will continue to watch over her and care for her soul and the well-being of her family. She remains pleased that the dams were stopped, and she still retains the newspaper clippings in which she is featured defending the Ganga.

Living in Uttarkashi's central market, Radhika's life is also somewhat similar to how it was before the dam opposition campaigns. She spends her time caring

for her ailing husband and looking after her children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. She also still receives visitors who wish to speak to, and receive blessings from, the devta that occasionally comes to inhabit her body with its divine force. What is different for Radhika from before, however, is the strong sense that she has made something of herself through her efforts to defend the Ganga. Activists and social movement campaign members visit her from time to time to update her on the policy twists and turns, and at times her house serves as a meeting point for such discussions. As before, Radhika's time is also spent visiting the Ganga's waters in the early morning hours, attending *satsang* events in which Hindu stories are told by *kathaawala*, and singing devotional songs to the Ganga in the evening with other middle-aged women living in the district capital. The rest of her time is punctuated by the tidbits of information and entertainment that come from friends and relatives or through the television that lights up the home at key moments of downtime in the day. Like Nirmala, Radhika is content in her belief that she stood up for what she believed and that she made an honorable effort to protect her beloved Ganga.

When we met separately in 2014, I shared with Sarita, Nirmala, and Radhika the key insights of the book I planned to write. This included the critiques of the high-profile campaigns based out of the plains, along with the potential implications of the Ecologically Sensitive Zone that was declared for the first stretch of the Ganga's high-altitude flow. Sarita, as demonstrated, eagerly concurred with my observations. Nirmala and Radhika were somewhat more reserved in their enthusiasm. In fact, in our last interaction Radhika defended the high-profile campaigners, like G. D. Agarwal, asserting that they had done what was needed to protect the most sacred of rivers. The floods, in Radhika's opinion, were evidence that he acted on behalf of the Ganga's desire to remain free flowing. "That is why we were successful, child," she told me. Commanding that I listen closely, she asserted, similarly to Nirmala, that the floods devastated the hillside, including Uttarkashi town, because the movement demands were not heeded sooner. "They didn't listen so Ganga caused the damage on her own." To stress the point, she added: "Mother really scolded us. She dealt us a large blow, didn't she? Mother Ganga, when we didn't listen, she took it upon herself to punish us . . . She caused a lot of destruction."

Although Radhika deeply lamented the destruction and worried for the future, she also felt that, on the upside, people had begun to change their thinking. In fact, she declared, many have become "wiser" by coming to understand that the building of large dams along the Ganga is not a good idea. For this reason,



she felt hopeful that things would improve and ameliorate (*sudhaar ho jaayega*). She cautioned, however, that not everyone can learn the lessons given. The bad folk, she said—the dishonest, those that are impure—they will never learn. They spend too much of their time focusing on making money and filling their stomachs. But, she asserted, the pure and “true” people (*sacche log*), they are catching on. These trends reassure Radhika that their campaign statements were correct and that the sacrifices, or *tapasya*, of movement members were fruitful. Radhika also contemplated that the karma, the *karm*, of the campaign members would be improved because of their actions.

None of this means that Radhika is opposed to development in Uttarkashi District or in other parts of the Himalaya. “We need development,” she reminded me one last time. It is because of this need that she contends they should build small dams on the Ganga’s tributaries. “If they don’t build anything, then from where will we get our electricity? . . . If there is nothing [if there is no development], then how will the state, *our Uttarakhand*, function?” Where Radhika continued to draw the line was on altering the Ganga’s last stretch of unaltered flow. “As I said,” she stated firmly, “small dams should be built . . . but Ganga should be left alone.” In her opinion, “Ganga belongs to the entire country, to the entire world . . . she belongs to everyone.” It is the affirmation of the river’s universal significance, combined with an understanding of the goddess’s agency, that drives her belief that its last remaining free flow should be left unfettered for the benefit of humankind.

In the meantime, Radhika contends that there is much work left to cultivate the inner purity of mind and body that the Ganga represents. Therefore, she, Nirmala, and a small group of Uttarkashi residents continue to enact devotional practices and to engage in cleanup campaigns near the river on auspicious days in the Hindu calendar. Both practices are actions of worship that simultaneously purge the negative thoughts and past karma of river devotees. It is by serving the Ganga that such people find a symbiosis with the river goddess. As they worship, they are blessed. As they remove trash from the river’s banks, they are purified internally. And since the upstream dams have been canceled, these activities will be able to continue for the foreseeable future. So, despite my criticisms of specific campaign actions, there is a silver lining to the movement legacies, one that means a great deal to select devotees.

Life goes on, with or without the contested dams. The women that were involved in the dam opposition campaigns stay connected to the Ganga and will continue to do so in countless ways regardless of the decisions that will unfold



in the future. As they go about everyday life alongside the river's banks, they remain worried about livelihoods. Tucked into their nuanced concerns are lessons about the importance of heeding regional ways of knowing and connecting to mountain environments that can be meaningfully engaged before decisions are made about development or conservation.

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# NOTES

## PRELUDE

1. Gaumukh translates to “cow’s mouth.” It is a reference to the sacred cow in Hindu cosmology. The symbolism of a cow at the Ganga’s headwaters ties together two icons of Hindu faith.
2. Electricity is generated in a relatively short time after the turbines on hydro-electric projects are activated. By contrast, coal plants—the source of most of India’s energy during the period of this book’s composition—take several hours (and even days) to turn on and off. Thus, coal plants do not help the country efficiently meet the spikes in the day when above-average amounts of electricity are needed.
3. As Alley et al. (2014) point out, the current wave of dam investment in India is motivated by interests in promoting industrial growth and urban expansion in the face of dwindling gas reserves and concerns over the use and sourcing of coal. It is significant to note that the power produced from Himalayan dams is commonly targeted for use in urban centers of the Indian plains. Thus, the projects typically do not improve access to energy for Himalayan residents.
4. Vocal dam critics included the “Save Ganga” movement, the water-harvesting organization known as Tarun Bharat Sangh, and the South Asia Network on Dams, Rivers, and People.
5. These networks were visible nationally. Yet, unlike the more infamous dam opposition campaigns, such as the battle against dams on the Narmada River that

gained prominent media attention in the 1980s and 1990s, the groups that arose to contest the three high-altitude dams on the Ganga were not integrated into a transnational activist network and did not attract substantial attention internationally.

6. Translation from Garhwali provided by Krishna Bijlwan.
7. To maintain an open approach to the desires and agency of my main interlocutors, I hesitate to refer to people as “anti-dam” activists anywhere in the text because the qualifier “anti” can imply a total negation. Instead, I refer to those most critical of hydroelectric development as dam opponents.
8. The degree to which one can or should include complicated and mixed desires for development is at the heart of extensive debates in environmental anthropology and development studies (de Vries 2007). It builds on a body of work in “critical development studies” that is also sometimes referred to as “post development scholarship.” This work, which became prominent in the 1990s, suggested that notions of development as they are commonly presented and enacted represent an effort to profit from the exploitation of “underdeveloped” parts of the world under the auspices of beneficence (Escobar 1995; Esteva 1992; Rist 2002; Sachs 1992). Such critical development scholarship shaped my early thinking on dams and development in India. That said, this book also represents an effort to explore how people selectively appropriate development discourse and practice while navigating differing notions of modernization and modernity (as per Asher 2009; A. Gupta 1998; Gidwani 2002; Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003).
9. During the main period of fieldwork, I logged over one hundred semi-structured interviews, ten life-history interviews, and ten focus-group discussions. I also attended twenty-five movement gatherings, and I participated in twenty cultural events involving the Ganga’s celebration.
10. In my view, social movements are characterized by sustained group action across time and space that attempt to achieve an articulated goal through networked, people-led mobilization efforts. A growing field of inquiry, social movement studies can benefit from greater ethnographic research (Edelman 2001; Gardner and Lewis 1996) and more gender-sensitive analyses (Drew 2014a, 2014c; Stephen 2011; Weldon 2006).
11. A common difficulty in speaking of “women” is that analyses tend to lump people in this gendered category together. This is far from my intention as I recognize the wide diversity of people that fall into such a grouping.
12. This emphasis means that the book highlights the struggles of distinct women oftentimes relegated to the sidelines who nonetheless endeavored to take active

roles in the opposition campaigns. Socially marginalized, financially struggling, and geographically dispersed, these women worked to assert themselves in movements often dominated by male leaders, several of whom spoke on behalf of mountain residents even though they often resided in cities at a considerable distance from the mountains.

## INTRODUCTION

1. Since this tributary is called the Ganga by my interlocutors, and since it is revered as the actual Ganga in everyday practice, I use this nomenclature throughout the text (rather than referring to it as the Bhagirathi or the Bhagirathi Ganga). For similar reasons, I refrain from using the word *Ganges* in this book as that name for the river is not commonly used in English or Hindi conversations within India.
2. Despite the reference to Hindu faith and culture in Pranab Mukherjee's letter announcing the dam cancelations, it is also likely that there were political motivations for the dam cancelations. Some skeptics, for instance, suggested that the government action, taken by members of the majority Congress Party in a coalition known as the United Progressive Alliance, was an effort to win Hindu votes in the impending Uttarakhand state elections. As it turned out, the Congress went on to win the state's third assembly election in 2012, beating the incumbent party and their main rival, the Bharitya Janata Party (BJP).
3. This discourse presumably drew from models external to India. In his promotion of modernization and industrialization, for instance, the late Jawaharlal Nehru argued that it was necessary to emulate the "West" through the infusion of modern science and the material practices of "development" (Gadgil and Guha 1992, 183).
4. Given the frequency with which kilometers (km) is used by informants and policymakers in this text, I cite lengths in kilometers and provide the mile conversion in parentheses.
5. When I began preliminary research in 2007, I was most interested in exploring what I termed (following a substantial body of literature) the "human-nature" relationships enacted between people and a sacred water resource such as the Ganga. At the time, I was curious about women's concerns and intimacies with a river considered to be divine because I believed that such examinations would provide insight into both the material and immaterial facets of what hydroelectric projects threaten to displace. Some of my favorite explorations of



human-nature relations included Julie Cruikshank's (2005) *Do Glaciers Listen*, Stephen Lansing's (1991) *Priests and Programmers*, Kay Milton's (2002) *Loving Nature*, Hugh Raffles's (2002) *In Amazonia*, and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing's (2005) *Friction*.

6. I do not use an acronym in this book, but should the central argument need a shorthand when used by others, it might be noted as PEAR (political ecology attuned to religion).
7. For more discussion of the critique of cultural ecology, see Biersack (2006) and Robbins (2004).
8. Orientations to an "anti-essential" notion of nature acknowledge that meaning-making and discursive processes are always employed in its construction. This implies that what we perceive as natural is also cultural and social; said differently, nature is simultaneously real, collective, and discursive (including fact, power, and discourse). It should, therefore, be naturalized, sociologized, and deconstructed accordingly (Escobar 1999, 2). See also Escobar (1996) and (2008).
9. Anjana Rajan, "A Call for the Ganga," *The Hindu*, October 2, 2013, <http://www.thehindu.com/sci-tech/energy-and-environment/a-call-for-the-ganga/article5192988.ece>.
10. In a later interview with Ajana Rajan on October 2, 2013, G. D. Agarwal even declared that the thousands of people who died in the June 2013 Uttarakhand flash floods "deserved to suffer death" because they treated pilgrimage centers as picnic spots and did not consider the damage caused to the environment and to the Ganga by their "rampant 'spiritual' tourism" (ibid.).
11. Founded between 1964 and 1966, the VHP claims to promote and protect Hindu values; it is a group with extensive political influence in India. David Gosling (2001), Ramachandra Guha (2008), and David Smith (2003) describe the group's inception, objectives, and programming. See also <http://vhp.org/>.
12. Partha Chatterjee argues that the defense of this particular form of Hinduness is only possible within "the modern forms of historiography, a historiography which is necessarily constructed around a complex identity of a people-nation-state" (1992, 112). As a modern construction, according to Chatterjee, its articulations are deeply implicated in encounters with British colonialism; thus, such historical claims about Hinduness are a product of the "contestations with colonial forms of knowledge" (ibid.).
13. On the birth of Hinduism, Christopher Chapple reminds us that the Persians helped shape the word over a thousand years ago when referring to the collective beliefs and practices of the people living on the eastern side of the Indus

- River. The term was later taken up by the British during the colonial era (from 1650 to 1947), and it continues to remain in use during postcolonial times “to refer to the religious practices of non-Muslim, non-Christian persons of Indian descent” (1995, xxxviii–xxxix).
14. Because of this variation and because of its overlap with other religious followings, some prefer to think of it as a doctrine rather than as a religion (Balagangadhara 2005).
  15. Such cautions limit me from taking some of the comments documented with the spirit of a radical “ontological turn” (Vigh and Sausdal 2014); some uses of Mother Ganga, or Ma Ganga, can be deployed in ways that inspire worrisome exclusions. Instead, I find it more instructive to explore how the Ganga is meaningful to the everyday lives of people as they move through various political arenas. As Anne Rademacher poignantly notes in the case of environmental degradation along the culturally and religiously revered Bagmati River in Nepal, to understand reactions to ecological change we must also engage the social dynamics experienced in everyday life that form mosaics of “moral logic, aspiration, and struggles over power” (2011, 183).

## CHAPTER 1

1. In the chapters that follow, I touch upon the caste-based tensions that emerge in movement and regional politics. These discussions, however, do not make up a significant portion of the text because high caste Brahmin, Rajput, and Shilpkar populations constitute the bulk of Uttarakhand’s population. Lower castes and “scheduled tribes,” by contrast, are a statewide minority (Chahal et al. 2008, 410). For those interested in Uttarakhand’s Dalit (“low caste”) politics, William Sax (2009) offers important insights.
2. SANDRP argues instead for projects smaller than one megawatt. Such projects, they assert, are cost effective and could be implemented with the full involvement of “benefitting communities” (2012).
3. A considerable amount of work has been done on the ecological and social impact of dams. Shripad Dharmadhikary’s (2008) work is specific to the Himalaya, and SANDRP (2008) is specific to the Bhagirathi Ganga’s plight. More generalized data is available from Barbara Rose Johnston (2005), Johnston et al. (2012), Sanjeev Khagram (2004), Thayer Schudder (2005), and the World Commission on Dams (2000).

4. The town of Uttarkashi sits at an elevation of 3,800 feet. It is located approximately 95 miles north of Rishikesh, a holy Hindu city at the base of the Himalaya, and about 230 miles north of New Delhi.
5. In ancient texts, Uttarkashi is also referred to as Saumyakashi.
6. Residents of Uttarkashi often shared stories of the Ganga's movements in Uttarkashi that upheld the river's role in the sustenance of moral integrity. One example, also cited in the tourist pamphlet, was the sudden shift of the river's flow from the east to the north to the south side of the city in 1857. The altered course is linked with tales of transgression in Uttarkashi that the Ganga undid by flooding—and therefore purifying—much of the city. Such events enhance the city's importance. As the pamphlet states, "Indeed, natural disasters including floods, earthquakes, fires, and landslides are a huge part of recent local memory but, with a startling resilience, Uttarkashi has only grown bigger after each one" (Andurai Ustav Uttarkashi 2006).
7. The British restored rule to Sudarshan Shah in the same period. He presided over the region from Tehri, a historically important location that is now submersed under the Tehri reservoir.
8. Stories convey meaning that can sometimes challenge dominant epistemologies (or ways of knowing) and ontologies (or ways of being in, and interacting with, the world) as many scholars contend (Apfell-Marglin 2011; Blaser 2010; Cruikshank 2005, 259; de la Cadena 2010).
9. Burial sites revealed pottery shards and Paleolithic implements made of quartzite (Gulia 2007).
10. The slogan, in Hindi, was: *Ganga ko aviral behne do! Ganga ko nirmal rehne do!*
11. Dam proponents sometimes argued that the projects could promote tourism. The Ganga Ahvaan member found this claim preposterous. She recalled that, in the 1970s and 1980s, dam builders promised that people would come to see Maneri Lake (a small reservoir above the diversion project at Maneri). The Ganga Ahvaan member then countered: "Tell me one person—I will never fight again with anyone—find me one person from down [in the plains] who has come to see the Maneri lake. Just find me one person [laughs]." In asserting that people visit the region to see a free-flowing Ganga—and not the stagnant waters of a reservoir—she commented of the dams: "There is no development in this."
12. While I recognize that phenomenology, or the study of experience, is a significant realm of scholarly inquiry in and of itself (see M. Jackson 1996; Knibbe and Versteeg 2008), I point out phenomena of encounter, not only to recognize

- the value of these moments for devotees but also to fold them into a later discussion of the cultural politics of knowing and loving the Ganga.
13. Tracy Pintchman makes a similar assertion when she writes: “The Goddess’s role as the dispeller of illusion who helps one achieve liberation (*moksha*) is indeed fundamental to her identity. Yet this role is essentially epistemological, for in such contexts the Goddess’s salvific power is related to her identity with spiritual knowledge (*vidya*) or her ability to grant or lead one to such knowledge” (1994, 7).
  14. Mario Blaser (2010) thinks of ontologies as (a) ways of understanding the world that make assumptions about the kinds of things that can or do exist, including their conditions of existence and relations of dependency, (b) shaped through the practices and interactions of both humans and nonhumans, and c) connections between practices, myths, and stories. Blaser cautions that while stories are a good entry point, we must also attend to the ways in which those stories are embodied and enacted. Ontologies must be understood as total enactments involving discursive and nondiscursive aspects.
  15. Despite my criticisms of dam proponents, I realize that many dam opponents and environmental organizations also have political and, in some cases, economic motivations for their actions.
  16. Interview with Dr. Ramaswamy Iyer on November 19, 2009.

## CHAPTER 2

1. As Judith Butler (1999) argues, gender is a social performance rather than a biological fact; the implication is that gender categories must be treated as social constructions.
2. With regard to knowledge production in India more specifically, Gururani adds, “Knowledge, scientific or indigenous, whether men’s or women’s, is not a neatly packaged information box but is shaped in contexts of social inequalities, local histories of conflict, development projects, and in the case of India, critically influenced by colonial and science interventions in resource management” (2002, 315).
3. An earlier note provided by Gururani explains that, in everyday practice, wives negotiate with their husbands while mothers try to influence their sons. This is how, as she argues, “In casually and culturally contingent ways, women and men share knowledge and influence each other’s views and positions” (2002, 318).

4. The Indus Valley civilization, which thrived over four millennia ago, is a potential precursor to what we now think of as “Hinduism.” Throughout the Indus Valley civilization there were long-term practices of devotion to the feminine divine that predate the rise of the Brahmanical system. In the archaeological remains of the Indus Valley and North India, for instance, one finds a distinctive set of female terracotta figurines that number in the thousands. We do not definitively know the functions they served, but they were undoubtedly important to the people who kept them (Hawley and Wulff 1996). In addition to their ubiquity, there is evidence that they influenced later genres since the styles that these figurines display are found in subsequent periods. Female sculptures from the Mauryan period (fourth to second centuries BCE), for instance, look like their Indus prototypes. As the Brahmanical system became dominant in North India from 1000 BCE onward, the material evidence shows varying degrees of integration with preceding cultural forms. The scholarship suggests that the development of what became known as Hindu practices therefore entailed a re-emergence of the feminine. Reflecting on this, John Hawley and Donna Wulff argue that, as the Sanskrit textual tradition developed up through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries CE, “the place of the Goddess in it became ever more firmly established” (1996, 1–2). See also Arya (2004), Foulston (2009), Pintchman (1994).
5. It is because of the multiple and overlapping ideas of the goddess that her energies can inhabit, and be represented by, numerous forms. As Leela Prasad (2003) notes: “The goddess in Hindu traditions is imagined in a variety of ways: a compassionate mother, an ideal consort, a model devotee, a fiery independent warrior who is not associated with any god, a local guardian or protector, or an unconventional, passionate lover. In almost all manifestations, however, she is seen as the wielder of special powers and as [a] benevolent bestower of grace to her devotees” (254).
6. See Dr. Emoto’s work online: Office Masaru Emoto, accessed January 14, 2015, <http://www.masaru-emoto.net/english/water-crystal.html>.
7. The unevenness of the ethnographic effort has fueled a series of critiques that were partially prompted by the *Writing Culture* project, edited by James Clifford and George Marcus (1986), as well as by the more gender-critical examination of the anthropological endeavor such as the *Women Writing Culture* volume, edited by Ruth Behar and Deborah Gordon (1995). The problem, these texts point out, is that not only is anthropological fieldwork riddled with crises of purpose and questions of research validity but the ways that we go about

writing up the results of our research can also be problematic. Anthropological writing runs the risk of passing off fiction as reality (as suggested by Clifford and Marcus), or it flirts with the danger of reproducing a gendered form of writing and representation that has historically favored the styles promoted by male scholars (as suggested by Behar and Gordon 1995). Another point that continues to shape anthropological writing is the caution by Gayatri Spivak (1988) that social scientists have historically failed to foster the conditions in which the “subaltern” can speak and be heard.

8. In instances where people are publicly known and the obfuscation of their identity is not possible, such as in the high-profile case of Dr. G. D. Agarwal, I use their real names.
9. It is common, and sometimes even expected, that relatives spend the night when they visit. Since some of the people I frequently interacted with came to think of me as a daughter (*behn*) or a niece (*batiji*), they often invited me to solidify my status as a fictive relative with an overnight stay. I was also a source of novelty and entertainment because I was an unmarried Hindi-speaking woman from the United States.
10. As Andrew Alter explains, the singing of bhajan “enhances the devotee’s love for the supreme, and thus acts as an ecstatic expression of love for the divine” (2008, 14–15).
11. The word *gulaam* also translates to “slave.” I have used a softer translation so as not to present the husband in too harsh a light (something that Nirmala would find unwelcome).
12. The deceased are often placed in the flow of the Ganga. People believe that the goddess will transport their spirits to heaven. Due to low water levels, however, foxes and leopards had been seen consuming human body parts that were meant to be taken away by the river’s flow. This was shocking to many in Uttarakashi and it reinforced their fears about the decline of the Ganga’s waters.
13. In a related comment, Nirmala stated: “The central government and others are ready to drink Ganga’s blood. They are not paying any attention to our feelings. They have hurt everyone’s sentiments.”
14. *Nadiya sarkaar ki nahi, manav saamaj ki sampatti hai! Pravah ki bandhe nahi, behne do!*
15. *Paryaavaran bachaao, sanskriti bachaao, bandhe band karo!*
16. *Ganga bachaao! Desh bachaao! Desh bachaao! Ganga bachaao!*
17. The dialectic between historical institutions and identity formation is crucial. Numerous past forces and processes influence the sociocultural worlds into

which we are born. As individuals of larger communities (kinship networks, religious affiliations, nation-states, etc.), we draw from existing norms and cultural forms to negotiate our own senses of self and self-conceptions (Price 2009, 232). This is like the *bricoleur* [who Claude Lévi-Strauss (1966) presented as a builder who constructs from the resources at hand]. These insights overlap with Bourdieu's (1990) concept of habitus, or historically influenced dispositions. "Habitus," Cheleen Mahar, Richar Harker, and Chris Wilkes (1990) remind us, "refers to a set of dispositions, created and reformulated through the conjuncture of objective [enduring] structures and personal history. Dispositions are acquired in social positions within a field and imply a subjective adjustment to that position" (10). In Sherry Ortner's (2006) estimation, habitus can also be thought of as a deeply internalized structure acquired over time that is controlling yet largely subconscious. Such observations on the nature of identity also build on the dialogism offered by Bakhtin (1981). Dialogism stresses the sociality (and fluidity) of the intimate self. "Just as local struggles are dialogic," write Holland and Lave, "the self process is (also) dialogic" (2001, 13).

18. Despite these observations, I do not assert that all the women who participated in the movements went through subjective transformations that were positive or empowering. Other women mentioned that they felt disillusioned by the degree to which their efforts were overlooked or underappreciated. This indicates the ongoing social and structural challenges many women continue to navigate.

## CHAPTER 3

1. These efforts, however, can also undermine movement processes since an enforced consensus can breed internal dissent and fracture, and lead to a movement's undoing (Walder 2009).
2. A sari is a 3.5-meter cloth that women in South Asia wrap around their bodies. It is the only dress that most married women wear in places like Uttarakashi. Unmarried women can wear the long tunic and baggy pants of the *salvar kameez*; or, increasingly, they can wear jeans and T-shirts. However, they are expected to trade in these garments for the sari after they are married.
3. This comment is about events such as the *varuni yaatra* that usually takes place in the winter month of March. The religious pilgrimage entails waking up at approximately 4 a.m. to dip in the Ganga. Following this, one begins a long

walk up the Varunavrat mountain that leads high above the flow of the Bhagirathi Ganga. The somewhat arduous trek, which I did with thousands of river devotees in March 2009, meanders through many hillside villages and involves pouring water from the Ganga (gangajal) in each temple to Lord Shiva that one finds along the way. The journey winds back down to the riverbed and culminates at a point where a tributary by the name of Assi Ganga meets the Bhagirathi Ganga upstream from Uttarkashi. Pilgrims often undertake this journey with a wish in their hearts, and they believe that the effort helps them accumulate merit.

4. Pine trees are a legacy of the British colonial era that post-independent India has continued to plant for their fast-growing properties and for the commercial prospects of pine resin (Guha 1989; Agrawal 2004, 2005). The needles that fall from these trees, however, cover the ground and make it difficult for other plants to grow, reducing biodiversity. To counter this, cattle herders are known for lighting fires to remove pine needles from the forest floor. This, they believe, will allow for the quick growth of grass. Some, I was told, also think that the smoke from the fires creates clouds that will generate rain in periods of drought. The result is that, often in the driest months of the year, the mountains are covered in forest fires and a thick haze.
5. It was never clear if the Ganga's role as mother was meant to extol the deity's physical, cultural, or spiritual attributes. That said, most of my efforts to assess this uncertainty resulted in explanations suggesting her motherhood was on all these planes at once.
6. The word used was *seedhi*; it can be translated as either "simple" or "honest." The NGO friend uses the second translation when he expands upon Radhika's utterance.
7. The dharmic-centered interpretation of environmental activism in India is a position that scholars such as Pankaj Jain (2011) uphold.
8. Policies such as the Forest Conservation Act angered many, including Chipko activists, by creating enclosures that restricted villagers' use of forest resources. This is reported by at least one source to have prompted villager-led deforestation in areas demarcated for preservation (Sarin 2001).
9. At the time of revolt, approximately 85 percent of the population in the Uttarkhand hills were upper-caste Brahmins or Rajputs and between 2 and 4 percent were Other Backward Castes. Under the government reservation scheme, most Uttarakhand's youth would only be eligible for half of the college seats in a region with few opportunities (Mawdsley 1997, 2224).



10. Subhadra Mitra Channa had the opportunity to see these tensions play out at the height of the movement for an independent Uttarakhand state. She provides a telling observation from the peak of the separatist's movement, stating: "I remember a beggar woman in Uttarkashi spitting at those who did not give her money, using expletives and saying, you '*plain log*' (people from the plains) have looted us and do not want to give us anything in return'" (2013, 29).
11. Outsiders also enact meaningful religious rituals along the Ganga when they visit Garhwal. It is this prospect of accessing the Ganga's free-flowing waters that lures tourists and pilgrims to the mountains, infusing the region with much-needed income. During the summer months, for instance, pilgrims fill the numerous hotels and restaurants that dot the riverside. "They come here for the sacred pilgrimage (*tirth yatra*)," noted Lakshmi, "not for anything else." That will all be lost, she cautioned, if the river's flow is impaired.
12. One woman pondered that, since Garhwali women work "like donkeys," they must have sinned terribly in their past lives to have earned an arduous incarnation. Manjari Mehta (1996) documented similar complaints in Garhwal: Women quipped that their lives are no different from that of the buffaloes in their care. This underlined the hard work and drudgery of everyday life for Garhwali women.
13. Ecofeminism, especially the variant proposed by Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva (1993), has attracted both praise and criticism. Although the ecofeminist position highlighted women's relationships with the environment, a few writers within the approach were charged with generalizing about "women" and romanticizing a "natural" relationship between women and nature (Baviskar 1995).
14. See also Mohanty (1991); Bhasin and Kham (1994).
15. "Perhaps paradoxically," Judith Butler muses, "'representation' will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of 'women' is nowhere presumed" (1999, 9).
16. Attention to gender is vital in discussions of Indian water resource management because "women" often bear the greatest burden of the problems caused by water scarcity and pollution. Studies show that the failure of many water resource management programs can be attributed to the exclusion of women (Ray 2008). This can include programs in which women are overtly excluded, as well as programs in which they are only partially or superficially included (O'Reilly 2007). The integration of gendered perspectives on water is even more

urgent because a “crucial” area of neglect in water management in India is the lack of attention to gender roles, needs, and concerns (Lahiri-Dutt 2006).

## INTERLUDE: A PRO-DAM RALLY

1. The slogan in Hindi was: *dam ke khilaf walon ko murdabad murdabad!*
2. The rice threshing process sometimes chips small rocks off the mortar. It is thus necessary to sort through homegrown and bulk dry rice rations before they are cooked at each meal. Biting unaware on a pebble in a dish of cooked rice can break teeth.

## CHAPTER 4

1. To be clear, my examination thus far has focused on the cultural politics of managing the Ganga rather than the politics with a capital “P” that includes the maneuverings of national political groups. Kelly Alley (2000), Chetan Bhatt (2001), Gunnell Cederlöf and K. Sivaramakrishnan (2006), Jose Kuruvachira (2006), and Mukul Sharma (2009) are good resources on the influence of Hindu nationalists on resource management decisions in India.
2. Although G. D. Agarwal negated the need for standard environmental impact assessments for projects on the Bhagirathi Ganga, he also pointed out the inadequacies and inconsistencies of the EIAs conducted for the Loharing Pala and the Pala Maneri dams (2008, 13).
3. The mixing of “right-wing” and environmental affiliations is addressed in S. M. A. Kazmi, “Faith Interrupts Power Generation: Right-Wing Hindu Groups and Environmentalists Are Against Hydro Projects on the Ganga,” *Tribune News Service*, September 17, 2009, accessed March 15, 2011, <http://www.tribuneindia.com/2009/20090917/dplus.htm#1>.
4. Speech to the Ganga Sammelan at the Gandhi Smriti in New Delhi on January 28, 2009. Translation by Harsh Vardan and Georgina Drew.
5. Comments of the Jodhpur Maharaja to the Ganga Sammelan on January 29, 2009.
6. Even though the creation of the NGRBA was heartening to some, there are many who doubt its potential efficacy. The authority comes in the wake of the

fiscally wasteful and nominally successful Ganga Action Plan (GAP) begun in the 1980s by a late prime minister of India, Rajiv Gandhi. That program, as several have noted (Ahmed 1995; Alley 2002; Bhargava 1992; Chapman and Thompson 1995), was fraught with corruption and a lack of political will to penalize polluters. The result is that the Ganga is now more polluted than it was thirty years ago. There is hope that a billion-dollar loan from the World Bank will spur new efforts to arrest the increasing toxicity of the river's waters. Those familiar with India's track record for the implementation of environmental programs remain skeptical (CSE 2008).

7. "On the Fence: Chipko Movement Revisited," YouTube, accessed August 1, 2013, [youtube.com/watch?v=tlooQxBTtL8](http://youtube.com/watch?v=tlooQxBTtL8).
8. THDC India Ltd., accessed February 1, 2007, [http://thdc.gov.in/Projects/English/Scripts/Prj\\_Introduction.aspx?vid=132](http://thdc.gov.in/Projects/English/Scripts/Prj_Introduction.aspx?vid=132)
9. Initially, a group called the Tehri Dam Opposition Committee (Tehri Bandh Virodhi Sangarsh Samiti) led the protest efforts. Virendra Dutt Saklani was the first chairman of the organization. Under his leadership, the initial years of protest saw extensive education campaigns, petitions, and "massive" demonstrations (Dogra 1992, 60–63).
10. David Haberman (2006) cites Sunderlal's framing of the Tehri dam as a fight between gods and demons in which "dams are the expression of demonic power" (72). Sunderlal explained: "The dam will kill the goddess because the water will not be flowing. Only flowing water is alive; dammed water is not . . . The dam will kill the *shakti* [divine life force] of the river" (ibid.).
11. H. M. Vyas, manager of the THDC, 1992, quoted in: "Tehri: Hanging Over Troubled Waters," *Down to Earth*, May 1, accessed November 11, 2016, <http://www.downtoearth.org.in/coverage/tehri-hanging-over-troubled-waters-29733>.
12. The charge of self-aggrandizement reflects the politics of representation, a concern that has charged critical discussion and self-reflection in anthropology and related social sciences that employ ethnography (Behar and Gordon 1995; Clifford and Marcus 1986; Madison 2005).
13. For an announcement of this award, see "Padma Vibhushan for Kakodkar, Madhavan Nair, Nirmala," *The Hindu*, January 26, 2009, accessed January 4, 2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/padma-vibhushan-for-kakodkar-madhavan-nair-nirmala/article383197.ece>.
14. C. K. Chandramohan, "Plea to Scrap Ganga River Basin Authority," *The Hindu*, June 5, 2012, accessed October 14, 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/article3567161.ece>.

15. C. K. Chandramohan, “Pro-dam Activists Leave for Delhi Dharna,” *The Hindu*, July 10, 2012, accessed July 12, 2012, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-newdelhi/article3622181.ece>.
16. The announcement is available on the Press Bureau of India’s online portal. See “NGRBA—Its Objectives, Approach, and Functions,” accessed September 28, 2014, <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=58626>.
17. Government of India, “Minutes of the First Meeting of the National Ganga River Basin Authority Held on 5.10.09,” Office Memorandum No. A-32011/2/2009 NRCD-I (December 7, 2009), accessed September 28, 2014, <http://www.moef.nic.in/sites/default/files/ngrba/1.pdf>. In item 5, where the Mission Clean Ganga 2020 was proposed, it was noted that only 1,000 million liters per day (mld) was the treatment capacity against 3,000 mld “in the towns along the Ganga” at the time of the meeting. The source of these numbers is not noted, and they are presumably estimated averages for capacity and discharge in major townships.
18. Government of India, “Minutes of the first Meeting of the National Ganga River Basin Authority held on 5.10.09,” Office Memorandum A-32011/2/2009 NRCD-I (December 7, 2009), accessed September 28, 2014, <http://www.moef.nic.in/sites/default/files/ngrba/1.pdf>.
19. See: “\$1 billion USD Support from World Bank for Ganga Clean-Up,” Press Release 2011/518/SAR, accessed January 4, 2015, [http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01291/WEB/o\\_\\_C-155.HTM](http://web.worldbank.org/archive/website01291/WEB/o__C-155.HTM).
20. *Ibid.*, 4.
21. Government of India, “Minutes of the Second Meeting of National Ganga River Basin Authority Held on 11.01.10,” Office Memorandum A-32011/2/2009 NRCD-I (November, 30 2010), accessed September 28, 2014, <http://www.moef.nic.in/sites/default/files/ngrba/2.pdf>.
22. *Ibid.*, 6.
23. *Ibid.*, 10.

## CHAPTER 5

1. The Eco-Zone notification is available online at <http://www.moef.nic.in/assets/2930.pdf>.
2. On the subject of climate change, it is important to note that the ecological and climatic shifts observed to date do not impact the Himalaya evenly (Rees

and Collins 2006), but they can have an aggregate effect on water cycles and river flows. The data on these changes are somewhat variable because new phenomena are constantly in operation and updated sources of information become available that alter previous analyses and predictions. In the last part of the first decade of the twenty-first century, there was initially a good deal of concern for the potential “disappearance” of Himalayan glaciers and the water storage system of the mountains (Cruz et al. 2007). The rate and scale of this shift was hotly debated and led to several critiques and controversies (Raina 2009; Drew 2012).

3. It was only then that I caught the name of the highway—Number 108. This is meant to be an auspicious number in Buddhist and some Hindu contexts, yet so far the road had been ill fated.
4. The technical expert’s perspective was decidedly focused on business. He argued that small dams amount to “trivializing” the issues since their overall impact will be minor. If the government supports five or ten kilowatt projects, he contended, “there will be no involvement from big, big organizations,” as the projects would only operate on the lowest levels of village administration.
5. This did not necessarily lead to a coherent development approach. As Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (1995) note, “For four decades after independence, India adopted a model of centralized socialist planning for all-round development. Yet no integrated view of the development process ever emerged” (116).
6. For more information, see Guha’s (2008) discussion in *India After Gandhi* of the challenges and strategies that Jawaharlal Nehru navigated after the country’s independence.
7. Alley (2014, n.p.) continues: “A piecemeal approach with the Jal Nigam exclusively at the helm has not worked thus far and it has sunk crores of rupees into poorly operated and maintained infrastructure, even in the face of national and global attention and numerous judicial interventions to the cause of Ganga cleanup. A careful constitution of accountable engineering agencies, a welcoming approach in planning and implementation to citizen contributions, and a vigilant monitoring of operations and maintenance practices by concerned citizen groups can go a long way to reforming the system.”
8. As a matter of fact, the backlash in Uttarkashi District, and in political circles of Uttarakhand State, was strong enough to call into question the terms of the Eco-Zone. As this book was going to press, a government panel indicated that via a potential dilution of provisions several dams under 25 megawatts might

be allowed within the Eco-Zone (as opposed to the previous agreement that only allowed dams under 2 megawatts) and that mining of the riverbed of up to 2 meters might also be permitted. See Mayank Aggarwal, “Govt Plans to Tweak Eco-Sensitive Rules on Upper Ganga Stretch,” *Live Mint*, October 10 2016, <http://www.livemint.com/Politics/CLlrsClnVSts6W2NRFIgKI/Govt-plans-to-tweak-rules-for-Bhagirathi-zone-along-Ganga.html>

9. This literature urges careful reconsideration of the exclusionary ways that such policies are made and implemented. Although a good deal of the existing work originates from Latin America and the southern half of the African continent, scholars such as Shafqat Hussain (2015) show that there are similar exclusionary mentalities in the kinds of conservation zones and “natural parks” that are implemented in South Asia. His work looks at the “romanticism” that led a stretch of the Karakorum Himalaya to be incorporated into the Khunjerab National Park (within a section of Pakistan known as the Hunza). The decision to create the park, he argues, was born out of framing of the region as “remote,” along with a “strategic essentialism” arguing that the landscape is unique and needing protection (191–200).
10. The *Times of India* reported that, from July 15, 2014, “Noida will become the first city in the National Capital Region to get 100% Ganga water, not mixed with groundwater, for the entire city’s needs.” See Meenakshi Sinha, “100% Ganga Water in City from July 15,” *Times of India*, June 10, 2014, <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/noida/100-Ganga-water-in-city-from-July-15/article-show/36317373.cms>.
11. Heather Bedi’s work is focused on the movement resistance to Special Economic Zones (SEZs) in Goa as an example of the ways that the zones are differentially received. Of the SEZs themselves, Bedi writes: “Spatially, the creation of SEZs enables a country to create advanced infrastructure and incentives that they are not capable or interested in pursuing throughout the nation” (2013, 28). She notes the following response: “Affected communities, activists, social movements, and others [have] critiqued the acquisition or transfer of land for SEZ development for facilitating corruption and unjust land transactions” (ibid.).

## EPILOGUE

1. The South Asian scholarship is significant because of the legacies of colonialism, postcolonialism, and subaltern studies that inform much of the work in

the region. The field includes Akhil Gupta's (1998) work on the hybrid technical-managerial practices of Gujarati farmers, Vinay Gidwani's (2002) analysis of canal irrigation in Western India, and Subhir Sinha's (2003) work with social movement participants in the Uttarakhand mountains (as well as his subsequent work on Indian civic society in Sinha 2008 and Sinha, Gururani, and Greenberg 1997). Gupta in particular has argued for a "postcolonial development" approach that acknowledges hybridity where colonial legacies and "non-Western" modalities are constitutive of everyday life even in the presence of "Western" development apparatuses.

2. Following the logic of select scholars (Sachs 1992; Escobar 1995; Kaika 2005), modernity has links to European Enlightenment thinking that conceptualized humankind's progressive material and intellectual advancement in a forward trajectory that leaves behind an inferior past. In this approach to modernity, the values of individuality, rationality, and the domination of nature were and are emphasized. Development is part of the project of modernity to the extent that it promotes efforts to control and dominate nature. Looking to the South Asian context, Krishna Sivaramakrishnan and Arun Agrawal (2003) argue that the choice for people on the ground is not one between development and modernity on the one hand, and nondevelopment and nonmodernity on the other. If development is part and parcel of the project of modernity, Sivaramakrishnan and Agarwal (2003) contend, what we perhaps see in practice are the ways in which people create and sculpt "regional modernities" that envision not-quite hegemonic forms of development that can be made to serve the goals of actors living amid a variety of geographic and socioeconomic scales. In short, the conversation has turned so that an increasingly persuasive group of academics now ask us, on the one hand, to consider how people's engagements with development are simultaneously shaped by discourses of political and economic modernity. They also ask us, on the other hand, to examine how people's engagements with these tropes might exert pressures on the very contours of development and modernity (see also Asher 2009).
3. The fate of the Himalayan glaciers is a specific point of climate change concern (Immerzeel et al. 2010; IPCC 2007). The worry that the ice bodies of this "Water Tower of Asia" will melt is a concern leading many to call for increased conservation measures (Dobhal 2009; Khawas 2009; Khoday 2007).
4. The reflection on human capacities to recognize varied metaphysical potentialities is important, and it is a growing emphasis in anthropology (Apfell-Marglin 2011; de la Cadena 2010; Cruikshank 2005; Goslinga 2012).

5. Although anecdotal, the story attests to some of the ideas that people have about the goddess's ability to respond to behavior in ways that overlap with Cruikshank's (2005) study of human-glacier relations.
6. One of the main reasons for this blessing in Kali yug is that it is less noteworthy for people to seek goodness in Satya, Treta, and Dwapara yugs given the general virtue and wholesomeness that is prevalent in those eras (albeit to differing degrees).
7. Although associated with a more secular set of scholarship, the topic of ethical responsibilities to climate change is a growing field (Daniels 2010a, 2010b; Mittler 2014; Randalls 2011).
8. Mahar, Harker, and Wilkes (1990) contend that symbolic capital is the most powerful form of capital (the others being cultural capital, economic capital, and social capital). Symbolic capital confers status, prestige, and legitimacy—positions that carry the power to name, the power to represent “commonsense,” and “above all the power to create the ‘official version of the social world’” (13).
9. Linkenbach (2007) contends that two elements are needed to foster the necessary conditions of listening. The first is the need for a “public sphere” where people can voice their demands in a way that is acknowledged by the state as a moral space for legitimate criticism and suggestions. The second is that people “possess reflexivity and the ability to develop a critical outlook and so are able to speak up, comment on state policies, [and] suggest alterations” (300).





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